INDIA NEED NOT STARVE!

BY

MICHAEL BROWN

WITH A FOREWORD BY

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FOR

M. B. B.

WHOSE PATIENCE IS INFINITE

FOREWORD

The compilation by Mr. Brown in the following pages is a valuable contribution to the correct understanding of the food question which faces India, and supplies an instructive history of the developments which have brought about the present critical situation. This historical résumé also enables a diagnosis to be made of the present diseased condition of the body economic of India. The efforts made by Mr. Brown to understand and explain the present situation in its correct perspective are laudable, being based not only on official reports but also on his own personal investigation, particularly in Bengal and some of the other affected parts. It is not to be expected that there can be complete agreement regarding all the inferences which Mr. Brown makes, but in view of the gravity and great dimensions of the problem, I look upon that as only natural. The salient feature of the book is that the myth of India having plenty of food grains is now thoroughly exposed. The strongest point which the author makes, and which nobody seems to have thoroughly realised, is that even with the quantity of grain available to India in normal times—both indigenous and imported—there was not enough to serve even the minimum requirements of the people.

The fact that there exists deficiency regarding both quantity and quality (want of balance in the diet of the average Indian) makes the problem still more serious, requiring further investigation and much more far-reaching remedies. Mr. Brown quotes Sir John Megaw, the Director of the Indian Medical Service, who put out a definitely startling report as far back as

1933, i.e. a few years before the war. The public in India are not able to understand the mystery how, with an Economic Adviser to the Government of India, this warning by the Director of the Medical Service should have gone unheeded, if not brushed aside. If the Government at the Centre, with a special department which they set up for the express purpose of assisting the economic welfare of the country, are not expected to pay heed to so grave a warning given by one of the Government's senior officials, one is forced to the conclusion that the whole machinery at the Centre and the spirit in which it is run require to be radically overhauled, if any attention is to be given to the fundamental basis of the welfare of the country. This, of course, is the production of enough food grains to keep the sons of the soil in a normal state of efficiency. In the distractions that have been caused by the indiscriminate and often exaggerated blame put on hoarders and profiteers, this aspect of the question has been overlooked, and I am sure that the present publication will draw pointed attention to this glaring deficiency in India's economic structure, both here and in the British Houses of Parliament.

Even when the Government of India began to attend to the food shortage, attention was focussed all along on treating the symptoms and very little was done to treat the root cause of the trouble. Regarding the statistical part of the equipment of either the Central or the Provincial Governments, in tackling this question, the author very correctly observes that " as a foundation on which to build up a distribution system, India's agricultural returns are a statistical quicksand." In fact, he very truly says that " to read the record of wartime food speeches by successive Commerce, Education, Health and Lands, and Food Members of the Viceroy's Council is to realise that figures can prove anything, especially when they are approximate."

In Chapter 19, the author dwells at some length on one solution of the trouble which strikes him as being effective to a certain extent. He says that the obvious cure is to bring the birth rate into a healthy relation to the food supply. Kate L. Mitchell, commenting on the Whitley Commission on Labour in India, reporting in 1931 when they attributed India's poverty to over-population, says: " Such arguments convey a picture of an enormously rapid increase of the Indian population as a result of British rule. Yet the actual rate of increase has been markedly less than that of any European country. Between 1880 and 1930, the population of England and Wales increased by 54 per cent., that of India by 32 per cent. Only in the decade from 1921 to 1931 was the rate of increase in India, 10·6 per cent as compared with 14·2 per cent in the United States, higher than that of England and other European countries. Indian poverty, however, does not date from 1921."

She goes on to say: " In fact, there is every reason to believe that by making full use of her resources, India could support a far larger population than at present. .... It may be granted that under existing conditions, food production is inadequate for the population, but should this lead to the conclusion that the population must be reduced, and not that the existing methods of production must be changed? The cause of Indian poverty is not the rate of population growth, but the fact that India is a case of arrested economic development. In Western countries, the growth of industries encouraged a rapid increase in population and provided for its support. In India, industrial development has been artificially restricted, and an increasing proportion of the people has been forced to depend on a primitive system of agricultural production, which, in turn, is less and less able to meet the demands placed upon it because of the crippling conditions of land ownership and taxation."

I have quoted from an American authoress of standing as I am convinced that she appreciates the difficulties of the Indian economic problem correctly. In all the various problems with which Mr. Brown has dealt, he has put forward his point of view with great clarity and I have no doubt that this publication will be welcomed by the Indian public. It is a thought-provoking contribution towards the solution—both short term and long term—of the very serious problem with which India is faced today, and it paves the way for a correct approach to the solution by the facts presented which should finally do away with many of the false notions that exist on this subject.

PURSHOTAMDAS THAKURDAS.

"Suneeta,"
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May 15, 1944.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Although three-quarters of India's people live on the land, the country as a whole does not grow enough food, and the majority of the people are too poor to buy enough to eat. Since war began, these facts have become so painfully apparent to all that there is a serious risk of mistaking them for wartime phenomena which will disappear when peace returns. The plain truth is that there is no reason for such optimism. The end of the war will not necessarily be the end of India's food shortage.

This book is an attempt to make a connected story in simple form of the rise of shortage conditions. As far as it is humanly possible, I have tried to render an unbiassed account of the facts. Not all of them will be palatable to those who have cases to prove—or excuses to make. But I am not concerned with arousing controversy or propounding new theories. There has been too much of both in the decade during which I have had experience of Indian conditions. Hard facts and concrete action are now needed, and there are signs that under stress of circumstances administrators and public are willing to get down to both.

The Bengal disaster forms only a part of this book for it is but an episode—though a gruesome one—in the long story of under-nutrition. For permission to use some of the material about Bengal I am indebted to the Editor of *The Times of India* in which my impressions of that province's ordeal appeared in November 1943.

M. B.

CONTENTS

Part One:
THE MIRAGE OF PLENTY

Part Two:
THE IMPACT OF WAR

Part Three:
THE VERY QUEER CASE OF BENGAL

Part Four:
WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

PART ONE: THE MIRAGE OF PLENTY

CHAPTER I
FOOD IS HIGH EXPLOSIVE

Through the big verandah drifted a savoury smell, a compound of freshly baked wheaten chappaties, dal (pulse stew) and an excellent vegetable curry. The steaming cauldrons held suppers for nearly 500 people whose shadowy forms were already visible in the early moonlight on the college lawn. One by one they came; first a mild-looking man, perhaps a clerk, with long, fine features, greying hair and spotless clothes. He drew supper for himself and his wife: a pile of eight chappatis, which he cupped to receive the two measures of curry. For his dal he brought an aluminium lunch box.

A fifteen-year old house boy followed him with basin and plate to receive his master's food, then another servant with a red shawl around his shoulders against the cooling evening. He was elderly, with thinning hair. For weeks he had come to this meal canteen, but he was still confused; at his age one did not easily become accustomed to drawing a dole for one's master whose kitchen had never lacked supplies. Others, less inhibited by customs past or present, carried their meal out into the moonlight, sat down on the grass and ate their fill before going home to sleep. None told me, however, how the servants got their own food.

Thus did tens of thousands of people eat in Dacca in the autumn of 1943 ; thus did they survive the Bengal famine. Artisans, clerks, teachers and less wealthy professional men existed on a meal a day supplied at the cost of one or two annas by the city relief committee's canteens. Ordinary incomes were useless when rice cost seven to ten times its normal price or was not available at all. The really poor people had to be fed free or they died—and they died in tens of thousands.

How could this happen in a country boasting a social organisation millenniums old, in an area undevastated by war, where the greatest rice crop India had ever seen was fast maturing? Where was the rice? Why had the supplies failed? Why were the rich still able to live without visiting the meal kitchens? Why did not the foodless take the law into their own hands, as they had done elsewhere? Why had the authorities failed to control the situation? These and many more questions clamoured for an answer as I watched the scene in that college compound. If Bengal could be reduced to these straits much worse might happen in many other parts of India which are less generously endowed by nature. Where lay the weakness, the fatal gap in the country's machine which made such conditions possible?

Perhaps the subject of food is so complicated because it is of universal application. Since people must eat to live, food is a good basis for news, rumours and even revolutions. It was Mr. W. H. Kirby, the Rationing Adviser to the Government of India, who reminded me what a high explosive food can be, especially in wartime, and who explained, long before the Bengal famine began, why it is essential for a country's administration to ensure that the public is fed, whatever the opinion of traders may be on the subject.

He also knew from experience of organising London's rationing, that even if the public dislikes control on principle, it will accept it when it knows that its food

supply is thus ensured. That means a definite policy of managed food in times of emergency, and it is interesting to note that the British decision to ration in case of war was made in 1936, thus giving the food organisers three years in which to prepare their plans.

That fact is often used as a defence by Indian administrations who failed to anticipate an emergency in this country, but in the majority of their cases it is a poor excuse to cover up the fact that for months and even years they persistently refused to plan at all, displaying a touching faith in the arrival of the millennium and the practical value of miracles as solvents of twentieth century food difficulties. All of which means that they were unable to read the lessons of their country's past.

The history of India, like the history of so many other areas, is a story of food. Any really deep analysis of the past will show that metabolism was, and still is, the mainspring of politics. Had the feeding arrangements of Bourbon France given satisfaction, the Bastille would probably never have been stormed. Had the steppes of Central Asia been able to feed all their rapidly breeding tribes, neither the Aryan nor Moghul invasions of India might have occurred. Note, too, how rapidly civilisation flowered in those areas where food was always plentiful; how Buddhism, the apotheosis of self-abnegation, developed in an area where there is normally a surplus of nourishment. The revulsion against surfeit can be as powerful as the politics of hunger. It is a fascinating theme which would repay much further investigation, but we have seen enough to show that there is a definite link between diet and destiny—a link which the leaders of India cannot afford to ignore.

It is one of the worst tragedies of twentieth century India that concern with what are often the minutiae of politics and administration has prevented the people's leaders from reaching the real fundamentals of the situation—the food deficit and Indian apathy to bad dietary. So many Indian diets mean rice polished

so that the essential vitamins are lost; a lack of vegetables and fruit with their vital salts, and milk, the very food the value of which the ancient Hindus appreciated so well that they established the well-known taboos regarding the cow. We are often told that even in normal times the average person is too poor to be able to afford more than a bajri chappati and some onion, or a mass of rice and a bit of chutney. That is not quite correct; were vegetables never so cheap there is no proof that the general public of India would consume them. Social usage in village and town places the emphasis on grain, usually in its least nourishing form.

Attempts have been made to overcome this state of affairs, it is true. But what good is research in Coonoor or food exhibitions in Bombay and a few other large centres while the rest of the country remains steeped in ignorance? I do not wish to diminish the credit due to the diet investigators and pioneers, but their lessons will be lost unless they are disseminated on a much wider scale and use made of the present food emergency to spread these ideas among the public generally by making facilities for change available under control schemes. By this I do not mean using legal sanction to force faddists' whims down the gullets of a helpless and unprepared public, but there is no reason why something of the same technique as that employed in England should not be used to further the cause of healthy dietary in India.

Already we have moved forward to the stage where the public's leaders are demanding that a generous minimum grain ration for each person should be established—a ration which a little calculation will show is much greater than average Indian consumption in recent years. Why cannot this demand be enlarged to claim a balanced diet for the people? It is no more impracticable and might indeed be easier to provide than unlimited floods of grain.

That there will be opposition to such plans goes without saying. Wheat and rice have a "snob" value

by comparison with bajri, jowar and maize. Sections of the public who normally only ate rice on high days and holidays, and who grew sturdy on bajri, will unblushingly stake their claim to a purely rice diet.

The problem of guiding public demand to the cereals available is no easy one. It is particularly difficult to make them realise that specialisation only increases the risk of shortage. This aspect of the food problem was well illustrated in Bengal, where the majority of people eat little else but rice. Since all the rice the public would have liked was not obtainable, the authorities attempted to fill the gap with wheat, including atta and flour. On the whole, the effort was not well received. Better class people, who were used to eating a certain amount of wheat flour, were in less dire need than the very poor who lived permanently on rice. Some of the latter thought that wheat made them ill, some did not know how to prepare it, and all thought the provision of wheat was an imposition. They wanted rice and wherever I went it was most noticeable that the demand was for rice, not merely food.

Opportunities of alleviating the Bengal famine were reduced because the populace could not or would not eat millet. Bajri and jowar were alleged to have caused so many stomach troubles in Bengal that their use in official food schemes became far more trouble than they were worth—except as a " filler " for soup kitchen gruels. In this way millet was " out of sight, out of mind," and the people who ate the gruel put on weight. But the average Bengali was so prejudiced against millet that I doubt if many of them gave it a fair trial. They neither knew nor wanted to know how to prepare it. The more politically-minded attacked Government for providing " grass seed unfit for horses " —in an area where they had rarely seen a horse fed. When I pointed out that Bombay thought well of bajri and that it had saved Western India from Bengal's plight, their attitude was that if Bombay was silly

enough to eat bajri that was Bombay's fault; in Bengal they must have rice.

It does not need much perspicacity to realise that so long as that attitude lasts, so long will the people of Bengal run the risk of famine and a lowered standard of health and vitality. Even in normal times the rice supply runs short every year and many thousands of people are half-starved for months. These people are the real foundation of Bengal, the labourers, on whose work the economic reconstruction of the province depends. Indeed, if ever the saying that "to-morrow's nation depends on to-day's food" were true, it is in modern India and particularly in Bengal.

India's population problem alone necessitates far greater efficiency in the production of essentials such as food. We shall not achieve that efficiency while millions of people are more willing to eat water weeds and tree bark than tackle a meal of millet or maize, the cereals that have helped to build the physical greatness of Maharashtra and the Punjab respectively. For India this is not merely a wartime crisis.

CHAPTER II

INDIA PRODUCES MORE THAN ENOUGH

"If the average adult diet is only one pound of food grains a day, the consumption needs of India are 50.5 million tons. With 4.5 million tons as seed requirements, the total food grains necessary are at least 55 million tons. If half the people of India consume a little more, viz: 1¼ lbs. a day, the figures go up to 61 million tons of all food grains, major and minor. And our normal production of the principal food grains is only about 50 or 51 million tons. If the growers choose to keep any quantity as insurance against bad harvest, if they eat a little more than the poor meal of past years, if there is any carry-over, it means a serious gap in the supplies available of the main food crops in the

existing condition of things for the non-agriculturalist population, which have to be compensated with minor food grains, vegetables etc. "

This remarkably frank survey of India's aggregate food needs and supplies was made by Sir M. Azizul Huque, Member of the Viceroy's Executive Council in charge of the Commerce, Industries and Civil Supplies, and Food Departments, when opening the Food Debate in the Legislative Assembly on August 9, 1943. It contrasts oddly with the views expressed at the first price control conference, called by the Economic Resources Board in New Delhi in October 1939. The conference was attended by representatives from all the provinces and several states and *The Times of India's* New Delhi correspondent reported that in the conference, " the general feeling was that price control should be relaxed, as it is no longer necessary for the bulk of goods. Fortunately there is an ample supply of most of the commodities India uses—many of them grown or made here." The conference included food prices within its scope and its views were greeted with dismay in Bombay where is was estimated that the cost of living had already risen by 20 to 25 per cent because of profiteering in food. But such developments in faraway Bombay, Ahmedabad or Calcutta could not shake official decisions in Delhi, set as it was in the midst of an area which grew more food than it could eat.

Those who were in a position to plan ahead were content with the hoary old argument that because 73 per cent of India's population subsisted as agriculturists it was impossible for the country to run short of food. Local shortages and even famines might occur, but past experience showed that modern transport could bring rapid and effective relief in the shape of supplies from more fortunate areas. Furthermore, when world prices were tempting, India proved that her food production was surplus to her needs by exporting considerable quantities of grain. As late as 1938-39 she sent abroad a total of 742,000 tons of food grains, including

561,000 tons of rice in various forms and 61,000 tons of wheat. So ran the arguments of those who sincerely believed *that, barring widespread natural disaster,* India could never be brought to want.

There were two weaknesses in the situation, however. The first was the relation of these exports to total production. Wheat exports in 1938-39 represented 2.8 per cent of the Indian crop while rice exports were 1.2 per cent. India's surpluses, as shown by her exports, were therefore minute. Only a very small variation in the crop or in internal demand was necessary to wipe them out altogether. True, Indian wheat exports had been higher from time to time in the past, but it was noticeable that these exports occurred only when the world price of wheat was above a certain level. In other words, there was no large permanent surplus which had to find an outlet at any price.

The second weakness was the failure to recognise India's dependence on Burma, which had only recently become a separate administration. In 1938-39, when India exported 742,000 tons of food grains, she imported 1,603,000 tons of "grains, pulses and flour." Of this total, 1,571,000 tons consisted of rice, either in or out of its husk, from Burma. Thus on current import-export statistics alone India was importing more than twice as much as she exported. Rice, on which the majority of her population depended, was coming in at three times the rate it went out. Still worse, practically all this extra rice was obtained from only one country, Burma. If anything happened to Burma, India, which "could never run short of food," would be a million tons in the red on rice alone.

But in 1939 nothing was going to happen to Burma. Indeed it was very difficult to remember that it was not still part of India. Superficially, the supply of rice from Burma seemed as permanent as anything well could be. After June 1940 it became more difficult to reconcile arguments about India's food surpluses with the facts. After the fall of France, Japan openly

showed her hand in East Asia, while the employment of the Indian Army in Africa meant that Indian food would have to go with them. Now what the average sepoy eats as a civilian in his father's village home and what he draws as rations in the Army are two very different things, though we should not make the mistake of assuming that the aggregate difference is greater than India's pre-war exports. Nor should it be forgotten that, unlike the markets for many of her cash crops, India's food export markets were not closed by war. Most of her wheat went to Great Britain and most of her rice to Ceylon and Arabia. Thus there was no question of frustrated exports being available for increased internal needs.

The policy of exporting food from India for the use of the Indian Army and to support needy areas such as Persia has of course roused much controversy and the United Kingdom Commercial Corporation has been made the villain of the piece. Without a knowledge of the complete facts—and we shall not obtain these until after peace returns—it is quite impossible for anyone to pass judgment. One or two points are worth noting, however. Exports through the U.K.C.C. can hardly have been as great as its wilder critics have alleged. Moreover, on more than one occasion the critics spoilt their case by demanding that Indian merchants should be allowed to do the U.K.C.C.'s work and take the profits which it was alleged to be making. The logical inference from that demand is that India's own merchants, so critical of the U.K.C.C.'s food exports, would also have sent out of the country all the grain on which they could lay hands and would have demanded the highest price they could obtain for it—which would indeed have yielded them a colossal profit—at the expense of distressed Persians. If these remarks about the U.K.C.C. controversy appear to be a digression, my justification is that in its mode of attack, commercial India showed no greater—and possibly less—appreciation of India's own needs than did New Delhi !

Had all the precautions—which later events have shown were necessary—been taken, the succession of Indian food crises might have been averted. There is, however, one imponderable factor in India. It is famine. In 1939 the risk of famine seemed the least of India's worries. True, almost every year some area ran short of food, relief works were opened and supplies sent in from elsewhere. The bulk of India's crops might depend on the monsoon, but only a failure of the rains on a really big scale could upset matters seriously. The possible effects of three or four years of poor monsoons, coupled with public nervousness and an overworked transport system, were not considered.

Before examining in detail how famine can defeat modern defences against it, it is worth while to look back over past famines—those occasions when India did not produce enough to feed a large section of her people.

Early famines may be summarised briefly, partly because many of the details are based on tradition and partly because until the last decade of the eighteenth century these visitations were regarded as natural calamities which man was powerless to prevent:—

650 A.D.	Famine throughout India.
941 1022 1033	Great famines in which entire provinces were depopulated and men were driven to cannibalism, according to tradition.
1148-1159	Almost continuous famine in India.
1344	Famine in Northern India; the Emperor Muhammed Tughlak unable to obtain necessaries for his own household. He ordered the evacuation of Delhi to Deogiri (modern Daulatabad) in the Deccan.
1396-1407	Durga Devi famine which devastated the Deccan and so reduced the population that land went out of cultivation for years. It was the culmination of nearly half a century of sporadic famines.

1595-98	Famine in Northern India.
1630-32	Gujerat famine when "life was offered for a loaf but none would buy." Whole cities and districts stripped of inhabitants.
1769-70	Bengal famine; 10,000,000 (one-third of population) perished.
1783	Chalisa famine in Northern India.
1790-92	Doji Bara or Skull famine in the Deccan; reputed to be the severest famine known in India. Extended over Bombay, Hyderabad and northern districts of Madras where relief works were opened—the first occasion on which this type of aid was attempted.

That is only a very brief list. Between 1660 and 1750 there were 14 major famines about which little is known.

Considering that in those days the whole food production of India was entirely dependent on the vagaries of the monsoon and that an era of internal wars caused widespread pillage, devastation and trade dislocation, such disasters are not entirely surprising. One would expect, however, that the comparatively peaceful nineteenth century, when communications were rapidly being improved, would show a diminution in the incidence of famine. On the contrary, there were eight major disasters between 1838 and 1899. The first two, the famines of 1838 and 1861 were in the North-Western Provinces (the modern U.P.) and 800,000 people are estimated to have perished in 1838. In 1861 relief was provided in time. Then in 1865 famine visited Orissa and spread to Bengal. The deathroll was estimated at a million, in spite of remarkable efforts by the Bengal Government to send food into the stricken areas, but there were few roads and no railways.

Four years later Western India and particularly Rajputana were in grave distress. The estimated deathroll was 1,500,000. This famine should be con-

sidered along with the outbreak in 1899-1901, which affected much the same area and, with the epidemics it brought in its train, cost a million lives. Both famines were remarkable for the migration of hundreds of thousands of people from Marwar, the worst affected area of Rajputana. They swept down through Central India and precipitated famine over a wide area which might not otherwise have been so gravely affected. On a smaller scale much the same thing happened in 1943, when destitute refugees from the Bengal famine helped to intensify food shortages in Orissa's coastal tracts.

During the 1869 famine the policy that the authorities were responsible for saving life was laid down. Four years later famine broke out in Bihar and Government spent £6,500,000 on grain. The result was that they were left with 100,000 tons of unsaleable rice on their hands and a huge debt. It became apparent that stopping a famine at any price might prove worse than the famine.

This revision of ideas was apparent in the great South Indian famine of 1876-78 when 5,250,000 people died in Bombay, Mysore and Madras. Great emphasis was placed on the use of relief works but these proved inadequate although at one period two million people were in receipt of relief. The disaster proved that though railways might transport the grain into a famine area, there would be heavy loss of life unless a very thorough system of distribution were organised. The lesson had to be relearnt again in Bengal in 1943.

The South Indian famine led to the establishment of the first Famine Commission, under Sir Richard Strachey, which laid down the Famine Codes. These regulations, with amendments to meet changing conditions, are the basis of Indian famine relief to-day. The Codes proved reasonably successful in the famine of 1896-97 which involved nearly 70 million people, of whom 750,000 died as a result of starvation. A Commission under Sir James Lyall was able to report that the success attained in saving life and the relief of distress was greater than had ever before been recorded

in famines of comparable severity. The expense had been moderate.

Hardly had the Commission reported than the 1899-1901 famine began. The area affected stretched from Bombay to the Punjab and included the Central Provinces, Berar, Ajmer, Rajputana, Baroda, Central India, Hyderabad and Kathiawar. The basic cause was a failure of the monsoon, followed by fodder shortage which caused great mortality among livestock. Then it was that the people of Marwar migrated, spreading famine conditions still further. Help was provided on an unprecedented scale. At one time 4,500,000 people were receiving relief, while the total cost was estimated at Rs. 15 crores. The famine and the cholera and malaria epidemics which followed it are estimated to have caused a million deaths. Such was the last large-scale famine India was to have until 1943. In the past 42 years the country has been by no means free from local shortages and in the last pre-war decade, Rajputana, Kathiawar, the Hissar district of the Punjab and parts of Bombay and Madras have had to be relieved.

The fact that these localised shortages—however acute they might be—never developed into widespread famine, produced a number of curious illusions. The first was that because in the past the famine relief machine had reached a "remarkable degree of perfection" (I would prefer to call it "a moderate degree of efficiency") it therefore remained effective, despite rapidly changing conditions. Such was the prestige of the Famine Code that no one visualised the possibility of circumstances in which it would be useless—as it was useless in Bengal in 1943 when a provincial Minister had to admit that he could not invoke it because his Government could not carry out their statutory obligations!

The second false premise was that India was so covered with roads and railways that food supplies could move freely, making relief available anywhere. No one apparently remembered that those same roads

and railways could be used by speculators to strip a district bare, or that the Indian railways had in any case become incapable of handling efficiently sustained demands for extra traffic.

The extension of irrigation was held to have given previously famine stricken districts permanent protection. That is no doubt true in some cases, but the permanent increase in production was soon overtaken by the even more rapid increase in population. The peasantry were believed to have accumulated a certain reserve against rainless days during the comparatively prosperous decade of the 1920's and the growth of co-operative credit was said to have greatly strengthened rural economy. All that improvement was of course destroyed—if indeed it ever existed—during the depression of 1929-32, from which rural India has hardly yet recovered. Quite the most fantastic reason for supposing that famine risks had been reduced was the claim that the growth of industries had lightened pressure on the land. As a matter of statistics, and not wild guesswork such as the above surmises appear to be based on, the growth of industrial employment lagged far behind the growth of population. So far from easing pressure on the productive capacity of the land industrialisation tends to increase it because industrial labour also has to have food which only the soil can produce.

CHAPTER III

THE UNCOMFORTABLE FACTS

So far I have tried to indicate the curious set of impressions regarding the food situation which were current in India until the fall of Burma. These beliefs —that by and large, India could live on what she grew inside her own borders and that famine was a thing of the past—were not very firmly based on facts and many people may be excused if, made wiser by later experience, they deny having ever supported such

false ideas. Because public memory is so notoriously short we must be on our guard against any slackening of effort to reform the food situation when the present crisis has passed. Indeed the necessity of combating complacency cannot be over-emphasised. Apart from what we have already seen, the facts which I shall submit in the following paragraphs will show, I think, that even if there had been no risk of war, India should have employed the past decade in setting her food supply in order.

The mirage of plenty deceived many, but there were voices—authoritative voices—which periodically shattered the complacent atmosphere with singularly unpleasant facts. Though some of these facts received wide publicity, they were generally ignored both by the public and the administration. Now and again some-one made a grab at them for use in political stone-throwing, but no leader of public opinion came forward with any constructive ideas.

The first warning came in 1931 when the Census revealed that the country's population had increased by 33 million or 10.6 per cent. since 1921. Such figures showed a tremendous acceleration in the rate of population growth. In the previous decade, from 1911 to 1921, the increase had been only 1.2 per cent. Since no serious famine or epidemic visited the country from 1931 onwards it was reasonable to assume that the population would continue to increase at somewhere near the same rate. The 1941 Census results more than justified that supposition. The present rate of increase is five million a year.

Such an increase means that every year the pressure on the country's food supply is becoming greater. While peace lasted, India's growing deficiency was made good by imports from Burma and elsewhere. Until war came, this method of subsistence was feasible, though surely it was questionable whether it was either wise or safe for an economically undeveloped country like India to spend money, derived from her exports of raw materials (most of them agricultural

produce), on buying such a prime necessity as food (which she could easily have produced for herself). *Anyway, by 1938* India was spending more than Rs. 13½ crores a year on buying food from abroad, and quite a number of people are anxious to pay foreign farmers even more than that in order to import still more food. Perhaps one day we shall realise that one year's expenditure on foreign food would have bought much of the plant to make the chemical fertilisers needed to render India's larder self-supporting. Let us hope this notion will not dawn too late.

The next stage in this uncomfortable story came in 1933 when Major-General Sir John Megaw, the Director-General of the Indian Medical Service, published his "Enquiry into Certain Public Health Aspects of Village Life in India." The information was based on replies to questionnaires by doctors operating village dispensaries throughout British India and the results showed a truly extraordinary state of affairs. Sir John Megaw wrote:

> "The figures which deal with the state of nutrition of the villagers are frankly impressionistic but they are not likely to convey an exaggerated idea of the number of people who are poorly or badly nourished; the village doctors are unlikely to have adopted a high scale of standards in this matter and it is probable that the figures would have been even more unfavourable if European doctors had made the estimates. Taking India as a whole the dispensary doctors regard 39 per cent of the people as being well nourished, 41 per cent as poorly nourished and 20 per cent as very badly nourished. The most depressing picture is painted by the doctors of Bengal who regard only 22 per cent of the people of the province as being well nourished while 31 per cent are considered to be very badly nourished. It is impossible to express any dogmatic opinion as to the relative influence of insufficient diet and disease on the physical condition of the villagers but it is obvious that diet must play a very important part."

Tragic proof that the results shown by this survey were by no means wide of the mark was supplied by Bengal in 1943 when hundreds of thousands of people passed within a few weeks from undernourishment to extreme emaciation. This dramatic collapse of the poorest classes in Bengal proved that they possessed no reserve of either health or food. There may be a dozen explanations of why famine broke out when it did ; but beneath them all is the stubborn fact that a considerable percentage of Bengalis had been in a state of semi-starvation for years.

In drawing his conclusions Sir John Megaw did not mince matters. Regarding food and nutrition he found that " India has a poorly nourished population. . . . . periods of famine and scarcity of food have been occurring in one village out of every five during a ten-year period in which there has been no exceptional failure of the rains. . . . . In spite of the excessively high death rate the population is increasing much more rapidly than the output of food and other commodities. . . . . Worst of all, there is little evidence that the educated classes of the community have realised the full gravity of the situation : At any rate they have made no constructive proposals for investigating the problem or for working out a plan for its solution. "

Sir John Megaw added :

> " The history of the past century is that the Government of India has constructed canals, railways and roads, it has provided security of life and property, promoted education, medical relief, improvements in agriculture and industries and instituted measures of public health. The net result is that more than 350 millions of people are living in a better economic condition than was the case when the population was only 250 millions. This is the bright side of the picture but the present situation does not justify a complacent attitude. It is clear that the growth of population has already begun to outstrip the increase in the production of the necessities of life so that even the existing low

standards of economic life must inevitably become still lower unless some radical change is brought about. The outlook for the future is gloomy to a degree, not only for the masses of the people who must face an intensified struggle for bare subsistence, but also for the upper classes whose incomes depend on the production of a surplus of crops and other commodities. If the entire produce of the soil is needed to provide for the urgent needs of the cultivators nothing will be left for the payment of rents or revenue, nothing to exchange for other commodities or even for the purchase of railway tickets and the whole social structure of India must inevitably be rudely shaken if not completely destroyed."

That warning was given ten years ago. Since then there has been a steady increase in the population with no corresponding rise in the food supply, which has indeed contracted since the fall of Burma. One point, however, deserves to be clearly appreciated. It is this : *Even when India could grow and import as much food as she wished, only 39 out of every 100 of her people were well nourished. The remaining 61 were either poorly or very badly nourished.*

Why should this state of affairs persist? The most obvious reason is the economic one : Many people just cannot afford to eat better. Dr. W. R. Aykroyd, Director of the Nutrition Research Laboratories, Coonoor, who has done much in recent years to analyse the deficiencies in Indian dietary and suggest improvements, frankly admitted the difficulties when he wrote :

"Well-balanced diets are in general more expensive than deficient ones. For example, the 'insufficient and ill-balanced' diet. . . which is largely composed of rice and contains very little milk, vegetables or fruit, would cost about Rs. 2.8 per adult per month ; the 'well-balanced' diet, richer in milk and other foods, Rs. 5 to Rs. 6 (estimates based on pre-war prices). It is at this point that

the nutrition worker encounters the main difficulty. Those who suffer from under and mal-nutrition usually cannot afford to purchase a satisfactory diet."

The types of diet examined by Dr. Aykroyd are interesting.

The "insufficient and ill-balanced" diet consists of:—

Rice	15 oz.
Milk	1 oz.
Pulses	1 oz.
Non-leafy vegetables	1.5 oz.
Green-leafy ,,	2.5 oz.
Fat and oils	0.5 oz.

His "well balanced" diet changes these proportions considerably:

Rice	10 oz.
Millet (or wheat atta)	5 oz.
Milk	8 oz.
Pulses	3 oz.
Non-leafy vegetables	6 oz.
Green-leafy ,,	4 oz.
Fats and oils	2 oz.
Fruit	2 oz.

Curiously enough, this would be a really "vegetarian" diet whereas the normal diet consists almost entirely of grain. This is of considerable importance in planning food production since the less the people's diet is concentrated on one crop which can only be grown in the comparatively limited areas where conditions are suitable, the better chance there is of feeding everyone. The eight-fold increase in the use of milk and the fourfold increase in fats and oils mean that dairying requires huge expansion in India. And by dairying I do not mean merely enlarging the herds of scrawny village cattle hunting for a living among the rubbish dumps and dry fields. Some progress is being made in improving milk yields in India but the scope of the work is microscopic compared with the country's real needs. The same remark applies to vegetable and fruit gardening.

But the most striking change of all must come among the people themselves. Not only must they be prepared to shed conservative ideas of diet in order to make the best use of the grain available but their power to purchase food must be doubled—even in peacetime. The problem of feeding India cannot therefore be left to the crop and diet experts. The economic planner must also take a hand.

In the meantime what is the position under war conditions? According to statistics given by Sir M. Azizul Huque to the Legislative Assembly, "rice production in India from 1911-12 to 1942-43 has remained nearly constant between the figures of 25 million tons to 27 million tons. . . . As compared with three pre-war years, the combined acreage for our basic foodgrains, rice and wheat, is almost constant, viz: 108, 109, 108, 108, 107.5 and 109 million acres as from 1937-38 to 1942-43 respectively. In the meantime population has increased from about 311 million in 1910-11 to 388 million in 1941, with a corresponding increase of the rice-eating population. The main food grains production of India has also remained practically constant between 50 million and 51 million tons, with small variations from year to year. It is difficult to believe that there has not been at least some increase of production in this long period in spite of a very large increase of population. But there is at least some relative truth behind these statistical figures, however inaccurate they may otherwise be. And that is, that there is some actual lag between production and population figures."

What this "lag" may amount to was revealed in the case of Bengal where Sir Azizul Huque estimated that the annual per capita production of rice is 70 lb. less to-day than it was 30 years ago.

It is also possible to construct statistics to show that actual production of grain per acre has fallen. A table compiled by Mr. A. N. Krishnan Nair and published in *Commerce* in July, 1943, showed that from a yield of 963 lb per acre in the first five years of the

present century rice production had fallen to 785 lb. per acre in 1935-40. Moreover the diminution had been fairly progressive over the intervening quinquenniums. The yield of wheat also showed a slight fall. Whether this is due to the lower fertility of new areas brought into cultivation pulling down the all-India average (a factor which Mr. Nair scouts), or a general decline in soil fertility and human effort, it is a highly dangerous tendency, especially when coupled with a rising population.

At the moment, however, we are mainly concerned with feeding 388 million people on a maximum production of 51 million tons of grain. If we assume that the grower and middleman make all their stocks freely available and that rationing provides every man, woman and child with an equal share and that they can afford to buy their full ration, the daily allowance is a little over 12 oz. a head. Even if we assume that small children will be allowed less than adults we still have to provide extra sustenance for the manual labourer doing heavy work and the annual increase of five million mouths in the population! Were the whole of India to be rationed at the rate of a pound a head a day we would need more than 63 million tons of food grains a year or 10 million tons more than India can grow in a good year under present conditions. On the pound-a-head-a-day basis that deficit is growing at the rate of about 800,000 tons a year.

Such are the uncomfortable facts.

CHAPTER IV

DOES THE INDIAN FARMER KNOW HIS JOB?

"The system of agriculture followed in large parts of India is very ancient and was formerly very widespread: It is fundamentally the same as that followed for centuries in England—indeed almost until our own time. It is based on the production

of grain for human food, fibre for clothing and oil for burning, but it makes little provision for animal food except the straw or stalks of the grain crop and such wild vegetation as may be available for grazing. . . . The system has two great advantages : permanence, for apart from actual removal of the soil by flood or other agency there is no reason why the system should ever fail, and economy. Some eleven persons are sustained per ten acres of land while on the modern western standards and systems more than double this area is needed. But against this are the grave disadvantages that the yields are low, consequently the villages remain poor ; and the standard of living is low ; the diet provided is almost entirely grain, it lacks variety and is poor in animal products.

" The change from the ancient to the modern system took some 70 years to accomplish in the west. There is no occasion to despair of its accomplishment in India. "

That is the opinion of Sir John Russell, Britain's foremost agricultural scientist, expressed in 1937 in his " Report on the Work of the Imperial Council of Agricultural Research in applying Science to Crop Production in India. " It strikes an admirable balance between the theoretician who would have the Indian farmer relearn his technique from A to Z, and the old and crusted conservative who believes that the ryot anticipated the discoveries of modern science many centuries ago and therefore has nothing to learn.

What is not so often realised by the disputants—and the general public—is the degree to which Indian production has failed to keep pace with the rest of the world. Here are some comparisons : India grows from 750 to 900 lb. of rice per acre, compared with America's 1,500 lb. Egypt's 2,000 lb., Japan's 2,300 lb. and Italy's 3,000 lb. Wheat yields per acre are : India 650 lb., Australia 710 lb., Argentina 780 lb., U. S. A. 850 lb., Canada 975 lb. and Europe 1,150. Much the same story

can be told of every other crop ; India remains woefully behind the rest of the world when she pursues her traditional methods. Where, however, capital can be invested in the land and advantage taken of modern technique, manure and irrigation, yields which challenge comparison anywhere can be obtained.

This capacity of the land to yield more per acre than it does at present is the obvious solution of India's food problem. With the population increasing at the rate of over ten per cent every decade and the area of cultivation steadily nearing its limit, a system of intensive, rather than extensive farming is urgently needed, although the critics can show that as much 100 million acres, classed as "culturable waste other than fallow," are still available for cultivation. For example, Dr. Radhakamal Mukerjee claims that the area available for cultivation could "probably be extended by a third by the reclamation of cultivable lands, and planned interprovincial migration to provide cultivators for these new lands." Theoretically, these views are no doubt correct. What should not be overlooked, however, is the poor potential yield of this new land. Why, in such a densely populated country, was it not already in use? A common explanation for land remaining vacant is that it is less fertile than the average, that the climate in that area is too unreliable or that essential facilities such as irrigation are lacking. For example, fifty years ago much of Sind might have been classed as "culturable waste" but the climate was such that this area could not attract even subsistence farmers until the Lloyd Barrage provided water. Similarly distress in the notorious Bombay scarcity area of Bijapur (it was once the capital of one of the richest sultanates of the Deccan) has grown more acute as pressure of population forces cultivators to take up more and more low grade land which is no doubt classed as "culturable waste."

Suppose, however, that the area at present under cultivation could be made to double its yield. India would have a better food supply than at present

without having to touch that extra 33 per cent of cultivable waste. I do not claim that the waste should therefore be left uncultivated, but we have to look ahead to further population increase or to a rising standard of living, either of which will absorb any additional food producing facilities all too rapidly!

In planning more intensive cultivation one should not be misled by Sir John Russell's remark that on western standards of living double the present area would be required to support the population. In the West the land yields only one crop a year. In most of India two crops can be grown and in certain areas, the fields will yield three times. Whether this abundance is actually obtained in full measure depends almost entirely on the climate, the provision of irrigation, and the local farming technique.

The business of making two crops grow where one grew before is not merely a matter of building a few irrigation canals. The ryot on the spot may point out that his land is not fertile enough to yield twice in the year. Here we must admit that the cultivator knows his job. He may lack science degrees but he can usually be depended on to know his soil and the type of crop it will grow. Indeed it is difficult to persuade him to make an experiment against his own judgment. The enthusiast for progress naturally condemns this attitude, usually without realising that the ryot cannot experiment because he cannot afford to fail. Failure means starvation. I know areas where water suitable for irrigation has flowed unused for years because the local cultivators grow only one crop—during the monsoon. When I asked them why they didn't use the water close at hand for a second crop they said the soil would not stand it. The absent factor was manure which was too expensive in this area where debts were high and crop prices low.

Poverty is also the main reason why improvements in technique spread so slowly. For example, the iron plough which, by comparison with the ancient but still fashionable wooden model, really opens up the land

and enables it to retain its moisture. In many areas iron ploughs may be hired or bought at concession rates. But this cost is often less of a consideration than the first effects of deep ploughing on the land. If your field has been cultivated to a depth of three inches for centuries and you suddenly plough it up to a depth of six inches, you will bury the fertile top layer under several inches of infertile soil. Unless this infertile soil from underneath is thoroughly manured, your next crop will be a failure. Later, it is true, deep cultivation will cause a general and marked improvement, but how are you to live during the transition period? It is a question which the men who would improve India's agriculture have not yet answered. But until it has been answered, the rate of progress in Indian farming will be woefully slow.

Indeed, there is so little connection between the condition of the ordinary cultivator's crops and the work of India's agricultural scientists that one is tempted to ask whether the Government of India is justified in supporting so many science graduates who appear to be "eating their heads off" so far as immediate improvement of Indian farming is concerned. It is difficult, for example, to reconcile claims to have doubled and trebled yields by developing new types of staple cereals with the possibility that the all-India rate of yield is falling. The distribution of improved seed is a regular part of every official "Grow More Food" campaign. The non-official investigator's problem is to run to earth the men who actually sowed such seed and grew a better crop. I do not deny that such seed is issued every year and that many cultivators use it to very good effect, but except in the case of sugar cane, cotton and improved wheat in prosperous Punjab colonies, I think I am correct in claiming that the generality of Indian farms are in much the same state as they were when the first Moghul made himself Emperor. In the interval the population has quadrupled, though I doubt if the amount of fertile land under cultivation has increased in the same ratio.

Let me offer a specific example of rural reactions to official improvement plans. In the years before the war I spent a good deal of time in Bombay Presidency villages in an attempt to discover how the people were reacting to the then fashionable schemes of rural uplift. Naturally, many of my chats with villagers turned on crops and the new ideas for them. Here are a couple of typical cases.

The first was a man whom I met in the fields near the Bombay-Poona road while he was burning dung and grain husks to make a nursery for his rice seedlings. He tilled seven bigahs (two acres approximately) of land, three of which he held himself and four belonging to a Marwari. On these seven bigahs he grew one crop of rice a year—a late type giving fairly hard grain. The soil was quite good and he used a pit for storing the manure from his two bullocks and three cows. This was the manure I found him burning to make his rice nursery. His wife used a small amount of cow-dung for leeping the floor of their hut, but for fuel she used mainly brushwood of which there was plenty in the neighbouring jungle. In spite of this, he did not manure his main paddy fields at all.

After harvesting his rice crop sometime in October or November, he did no more cultivating till the following May. Even then field work did not begin in real earnest till the rains were well set and ploughing and transplanting could be done. During the dry months he could use his bullock cart to earn two rupees for three days work in carrying salt from the neighbouring pans to the railway. Such traffic and the hard cash it brought in meant much to village households towards the end of the hot weather. Other men in the same village did various odd jobs during the otherwise idle months—such as carting dry grass, burning charcoal and working on the roads or the railway.

When I asked this villager why he did not grow a second crop with water which was available close by, he replied, "Why should I? I have one crop and my carting work; that is enough." I suggested that even

if he irrigated only one bigah out of the seven he could grow vegetables which would sell well in Bombay. But he was not enthusiastic about raising vegetables, though he admitted that his family had to buy their own needs. In any case, irrigation water cost money and he had none to spend.

So I tried another angle. Had he heard about the improved rice seed which the Government seed station at Karjat was issuing? This question produced a much more definite reaction. Yes, he had heard about the new seed. It gave a good crop and really hard grain (which means high quality table rice). He had not tried it on his own fields because he had a stock of seed from the previous year's crop, but he might sow improved seed next season. Apparently he had been sufficiently interested to find out for himself about the new seed, because so far as I could learn, no intensive propaganda for it had been done in this particular village.

He was also very interested when I asked him if he had seen a rubber tyred bullock cart. He had not heard of such a thing before but a cart with easy running wheels strongly appealed to him. His own cart had cost him Rs. 50 two years previously and with repairs it would last another three years. He wanted more details—strictly practical ones—of the new carts. He was reckoning how many extra maunds of salt he could pile on to a stronger cart with easier running wheels. Every extra bag of salt meant another two annas to him in the dry weather.

The second case which comes to mind was that of a village Patel (headman) near Nasik. This particular village had already been subjected to a dose of uplift and a Gram Panch (village committee) had been formed. They had progressed quite well with such details as tidying up the village and keeping the buffalo stables clean. They had also saved several official schemes from premature death by refusing to start them just before the monsoon broke when everyone wanted to harvest the onion crop and patch house roofs.

Their real interest, however, lay in inducing the official world to give better farming education for their sons. The Patel had even offered his own money to get such a scheme started. He and his Panch had examined the curriculum of the local school and though they believed education was necessary, they knew from sad experience that to teach village boys "seven books," as they put it, developed a thirst for big cities and not for father's fields. Since matriculation was not essential for farming they did not see why some of the seven books should not be replaced by a course in better farming methods. They had already established a plot of land for demonstration purposes, but periodic visits by an expert were not enough, nor had they enough money to send their boys to the nearest Government agricultural school.

This community was already seriously worried by the drain of men from the village. The Patel had 100 bigahs of land and a family of 20. But there were only six able-bodied men available to till these fields. He had to hire labour and in those pre-war years, when crop prices were low, he pointed out that hired labour was expensive even at four annas a day. The trouble was that most of it was very inefficient. An ambitious villager, instead of working to improve his family fields and earn more money that way, was more likely to go to the nearest town, where even such unskilled work as that of a mill porter or petrol pump attendant gave him more cash and the excuse that he was "earning money for his family." His efforts in this direction were not always successful, but in some areas the movement into town had been so great that a considerable proportion of the land was being cultivated by people who were not the best suited to do it. The best energy and brains were often looking for a job elsewhere. The spate of non-agricultural work brought by the war has stimulated this movement tremendously.

The old Patel's desire to keep his boys' attention fixed on the land was no mere whim. And indeed if

India is to feed herself his attitude must be the epitome of general policy.

We thus come back to the question : Can anything be done to improve and intensify Indian farming?

Considering the human factors at stake a great deal has *got* to be done—and quickly too. In this connection Sir John Russell's comments on the present methods of applying science to crop production in India are important, because Sir John, as head of the famous Rothamsted Experimental Station in England, has had the job of applying new discoveries to British agriculture. Concerning the application of new methods to the ryots' fields he writes, "....the cultivator is abused as slow and conservative because he does not change his methods more rapidly. But it is frequently impossible for him to do this. His unit of time is a year : 'Safety first' must always be his guiding principle, and methods known to give subsistence to himself and his family cannot possibly be discarded until the superiority and practicability of the new ones are established beyond question. Even when he is convinced of their advantage he may still lack the means for adopting them. Further, he thinks in terms of his entire system of cultivation and an isolated process, though good in itself, may not fit well in with his general management. This extension work therefore requires something more than education and propaganda for the new methods, it involves much adjustment of the new methods to the actual conditions and systems of the cultivators' land."

Experimental station methods are another weak link in the chain of passing on the results of scientific investigation to the grower. These stations are to be found all over the country and of them Sir John remarks : "Responsibility to the present generation must be recognised ; refuge should not be taken in the pious hope that practical results may somehow and some day emerge from the work. This is widely recognised in the stations I visited and the programmes were in general on useful lines though they were often

too ambitious. Three weaknesses are fairly common. The work is frequently too diffuse—a fault not confined to experiment stations ; when this happens the results lack definiteness. In many cases the work is confined too much to the laboratory and the pot culture house; the field and the growing crop should be the centre. Almost always it is restricted to the experiment station : test experiments should be carried out on other soils and at other centres not too far removed, so as to ensure that all factors coming into play are recognised."

The old Patel's idea of bringing these discoveries to the land via the village schools would serve the two-fold purpose of instructing the villagers and keeping the experts abreast of practical difficulties.

Regarding the undoubted fact that little or no attention is paid by the rest of the world to the results of Indian investigation Sir John points to the scrappy and fragmentary publication of results in this country, thus risking the consignment of much good work to oblivion. In a country where a very large proportion of the agriculturists are at the lowest ebb of poverty such conditions among the agencies which should be leading and instigating general improvement are little short of scandalous.

Sympathetic as Sir John Russell is to the scientific investigation of agriculture, he was forced to point out that " the great need at the present time is the wider and fuller use of existing science rather than the development of new science. Repeatedly I was told at the experiment stations that their yields were approximatly 50 or even 100 per cent greater than those obtained by the surrounding cultivators. There remains a great gap to be bridged between what can on present knowledge be accomplished and what is actually being done by the cultivators."

It is easy enough of course for the Agricultural Departments to defend themselves on the score that the area to be covered is vast by comparison with the staff and funds at their disposal. Nevertheless, after

personal observation in all three countries I notice that the average official in India is much more apt to feel overcome by the size of his job than his opposite numbers in the U. S. A. or Canada where equally vast areas are involved.

However, it would be most unfair to blame all laggardliness on to the provincial agricultural departments ; many of them are extraordinarily active within their allotted scope. The real trouble seems to be that this scope is too narrow, while general administrative and public opinion regarding the agriculturalist's needs is shockingly backward. Could the Indian farmer have been given as fair a deal as, say, his brothers and cousins working in the cotton mills of Bombay and Ahmedabad there would have been little need to launch a " Grow More Food " campaign.

A good index to the complete lack of appreciation of the Indian farm problem was the grandiloquent announcement when the "Grow More Food" campaign was launched that Delhi would grant a crore of rupees (a mere £750,000) to assist food production. Since there are over 700,000 villages in the country, that particular scheme meant spreading the help very thin indeed. Provincial proposals for using the money were often hardly more practical. In some areas promises of two rupees for every acre converted to food crops were made. This meant nothing while prices of both food and cash crops were still rising. In the cotton growing areas, for example, a very slight movement in the cotton market more than cancelled out this modest food premium.

Other provinces, realising the futility of this dole and the difficulty of deciding which acres really had been converted to food, preferred to spend their share of the grant in providing seeds of food crops at concession rates and in making available greater quantities of manures. This was a much more sensible idea, but events soon proved that the financial provision still met only a fraction of the needs. The story of "too little and too late" repeated itself in a rural Indian setting.

Today, thanks to the dislocated state of the food grain markets in many areas, the food grower may have difficulty in obtaining seed of any kind; the cost of manure, ploughs and working bullocks has risen far beyond his reach, and in spite of elaborate official crop buying plans he is still far from certain of the net return he may expect for his outlay. Under such conditions the stimulation of food production is difficult indeed.

Is there a way out? I think so—but it demands a mental revolution in our Secretariats. The first point is that India depends on her farmers, however good or bad they may be, to feed her. Therefore she must encourage them to do their best. The quickest way to encourage a man to do well is to pay him well. This means something better than 1941 prices plus 50 per cent. to cover increased living and production costs which have risen 300—400 per cent. No man is stimulated to heroic efforts by being told that his produce will be bought off him at a price which *may* just cover expenses—and that was what a lot of the official ceiling prices for 1943 crops meant. Surely, considering the height to which retail food prices have been allowed to rise, we could afford to be more generous to the grower who so far has received only a small fraction of what the consumer has paid. In any case it is of less importance to pull retail prices down to pre-war levels than to stimulate the production of bumper food harvests. It can be done by fixing generous price ceilings for the grower and without encouraging rural price inflation.

Having encouraged the agriculturist by offering him a good return for his labour, it is only fair that steps should be taken to see that the middleman does not again step in to make the position worse than it was before. By using subsidies and controls the authorities can ensure that the grower receives such necessary facilities as manure, live stock and implements at reasonable prices. The subsistence of the whole of India depends on what the agriculturist can produce

and for this reason alone it would be well worth while to *give* him the manure his land needs. Finally, there is the question of the grower's own living expenses. In spite of popular fallacies on the subject, the Indian farmer does not produce everything he needs: cloth, sugar (or gur), kerosene, salt and household utensils—to mention only a few—must be bought. Their price levels have advanced far more rapidly than those of food grains and until they are efficiently controlled the farmer will very rightly resist limitation of his income by price ceilings. No one has any difficulty in appreciating this logic when applied to millworkers' dearness allowances. Is it not time we also brought the Indian countryside into modern perspective?

PART TWO: THE IMPACT OF WAR

CHAPTER V
A SLIGHT DOSE OF INFLATION

When Hitler's armies broke into Poland, a fifth of mankind—India's 388 million people—were more concerned with half-filled fields than with what happened to Warsaw. Few of them foresaw that within four years a rupee would only buy six annas worth of goods. Only one group visualised the possibility of higher prices and worked hard to achieve them. They were the middlemen, of whom India has perhaps more than her fair share. Concerning them, residents in India's towns will recall that for days before war broke out retail prices rose almost as regularly as the sun; that on occasion the price marked on an article was altered upwards while the customer was actually buying it.

For a while retailers made colossal profits because the wholesale markets showed little disposition to move, though naturally the shopkeeper made them the scapegoat when bluffing an angry customer. There was also much talk about what happened in 1917-18, the last period during which prices had been out of hand in India. This chatter was started mainly by the traders, but curiously enough it was most energetically spread by the public who were being fleeced. For some strange reason, profiteering fails to rouse any really savage reaction in Indian breasts. Many a racketeering shopkeeper, whose conduct would cause his

premises to be wrecked in England, merely attracts still heavier buying rushes in India. The idea that 1917-18 conditions would return was successfully planted in people's minds and by acquiescing in traders' antics the public took the quickest road towards such conditions. Consequently, within six weeks of the declaration of war the cost of living was estimated to have risen by 25 per cent in Bombay, a city which depended almost entirely on Indian goods, the production of which at that time was still unaffected by the war.

The question will often be asked: Why did not the authorities bring the situation under control as soon as it became apparent that war was inevitable? There were several reasons. The first was that in 1939 the urgency of the situation was certainly not properly appreciated. Although conditions had been troublesome in the last war, they had taken three years to come to a head. Whereas in 1914-18 Turkey had been early in the field in the Middle East, this time there seemed to be little likelihood of the war extending beyond Europe. Therefore India seemed less liable to be affected. No one in 1939 foresaw either the East African or Western Desert campaigns, or the Burma frontier as the main land defence against a highly successful Japan.

On the other hand, the Government of India were not entirely unprepared for trouble. Within a few days of the outbreak of war New Delhi gave the provincial governments power to control undesirable trading movements. But the range of these powers was so limited that it was impossible to enforce full-fledged price control. In Bombay, the provincial government —a Congress ministry—ordered that no one should charge more than 20 per cent above the prices prevailing on September 1 for Indian grains, flour, vegetable oils, spices, meat, fish, charcoal, kerosene, matches and drugs. Such an order was peculiarly ineffective because by September 1, prices had already risen considerably.

By permitting another 20 per cent on top of that rise the authorities legalised profiteering of anything up to 50 per cent over the rates obtaining three weeks previously. Some days later the permissible margin was revised downwards to 10 per cent, but the damage had been done—profiteering had got away to a flying start, with Government's blessing. At least that was how the shopkeepers saw it and since there was little or no active enforcement of orders, it looked as though they were right.

The second reason for failure to crush profiteering was the belief that early price rises were the result of speculation—as indeed they were—and that they would rapidly collapse under the weight of the ample supplies said to be available in the country. Government had not yet learned that there could be a vast difference between the all-India supplies indicated by crop forecasts of doubtful accuracy and what the general public could actually buy in any particular place.

Perhaps the most important reason of all was the feeling, shared by a great many responsible people, that the prices paid to food producers for their crops were too low. Food prices generally had never recovered from the great depression of 1929 and shortly before the outbreak of war world wheat prices were the lowest since the days of Queen Elizabeth. These low levels directly affected the prices ruling in India and during 1939 still more attention was drawn to the ryot's plight by a series of local shortages.

After an unsatisfactory monsoon the fields in some areas were not even half-filled. Jodhpur had opened large scale famine relief works and in some areas of the State motor trucks were used to carry water to the workers because shortage of fodder and water made the trip impossible even for camels. In much of Kathiawar and Gujerat there was such serious shortage that those who were not too nice about the exact use of words called it famine. People were migrating from the drier areas of Sind. Otherwise India was more or

less as it always had been after a sub-normal monsoon —anxious, but praying for an improvement.

At first it seemed likely that a rise in crop prices might help considerably. It would mean that even those farmers who only harvested a fraction of their normal crop would have enough to survive on. At the outbreak of war, wholesale food grain prices were still abnormally low. During August wheat averaged Rs. 2-2-9 a maund in Lyallpur, the heart of the Punjab wheat country. That fact alone was a danger signal because with grain so cheap India was eating nearly all her own wheat and for several years had imported more from Australia, thanks to the phenomenally low world price.

It was apparent that, given the opportunity, India would eat more than she produced, but there was also a risk that the surplus crops of the rest of the world might swamp the Indian wheat grower. Presumably for that reason the Government of India imposed an import duty on Australian wheat in 1938. The official reason was somewhat awkwardly stated. It was that the consumption of Indian-grown wheat must be encouraged. Judging by the tendency to import grain, Indian *consumption* needed little encouragement while Indian *production* very obviously did. It does not appear that the protective duty achieved that desirable end. It was not until September 1941 that this duty was reduced to a nominal two annas a hundredweight.

Plain common sense indicated that there was something seriously wrong with an agricultural country which had to import quite impressive quantities of its staple grains—rice and wheat—from Burma and Australia. But more than common sense was needed to demolish the mirage that India was self-sufficient for food.

Those who had to buy their food had never eaten so well and so cheaply before. Even in the villages, where grain was sold at prices often below the real cost of production, there did not appear to be more than the usual number of ricketty children, beri-beri sores or

cholera cases. Or perhaps it was no one's business to look too closely since Sir John Megaw had flung his stone into the calm pool of public complacency. Periodically a province attempted legislation to break the clutches of the moneylenders and produced statistics showing astronomical amounts of rural debt.

Someone did peer sufficiently closely into the alleged progress of rural co-operative credit societies and found they were getting most unprogressively into debt. There was such a hasty shuffle to straighten up the books that co-operative societies became even more unpopular than village moneylenders. Even today it is only gradually sinking into the outer layers of the official brain that rural credit, marketing and production represent a trinity which no amount of rules and regulations can separate.

Someone else discovered that village marriages and funerals were much too expensive and that the opinions of rural society on the subject needed reformation. Perhaps they were right; anyway, a little preaching cost nothing—and achieved less.

In the meantime, the villager paid his revenue assessment and the interest on his debt—because he had to—and sold his crop to raise the money. No one inquired whether, with wheat at Rs. 2-2-9 a maund and cotton at Rs. 154 a candy, he would be compelled to sell so much that his wife and children might be denied essential food. No one who was not an agriculturist felt particularly worried about the vicious circle in which a man has to raise a fixed sum each year in spite of falling prices for his crop. The cheaper his crop becomes the more he has to sell and the more he sells the lower goes the price.

Such was the background of India's food production in the pre-war decade. Men and land were exhausted by prices which did not provide enough for adequate food or adequate manure. No amount of juggling with debt control and rural uplift could change the tiresome fact that by and large there was not enough money in the villages to pay for decent living and farm-

ing. It must be placed to their credit that certain economists, some of whom were connected with the Government of India, realised this essential condition. Consequently when the outbreak of war showed signs of ending the tyranny of low prices, these observers began to toy with the idea that a slight dose of inflation, to put more money into the ryot's pocket, might not be a bad thing. Of course mild inflation would mean that the ryot would pay more as well as receive more, but if the whole process remained in proportion, his needs were so simple that it would do him more good than harm. At any rate, his main worries—revenue and debt payments—were fixed sums and would diminish in importance. As a theory it was certainly attractive, and September 1939 seemed to be the time to try it.

Unfortunately everything went wrong almost from the start. There was no uniform rise in price levels. Manufactured goods rapidly shot ahead of raw materials; retail rates bore little relation to what the wholesaler was paying. Food prices advanced and fell back, proving that the whole process was within the trade and that the rise had not extended beyond the market to the primary producer. To many observers it seemed highly problematical whether any of the extra money the consumer paid out would reach the man in the field. Except in certain favoured areas such as the Punjab, the same question was still being asked four years later.

The amazing capacity of the Indian middleman to absorb profits on a scale never before dreamed possible was the theorists' first serious miscalculation. The second was the phenomenal rise in the cost of the ryots' "simple needs". Long before the food grower had managed to obtain a single anna out of the extra rupees the food retailer was making, the village Bania was asking hundreds per cent more for such items as cloth, kerosene and gur. The slight dose of inflation, far from acting as a tonic, became more like a purgative administered to a starving man.

As time passed, the dose gained rapidly in size and strength, though for that the theorists cannot be entirely blamed. The hand administering the dose was not controlled by them and it soon proved to be quite exceptionally shaky.

The powers of control given to the provinces at the outbreak of war were not accompanied by any indication of general policy. Consequently each administration went its own way, usually without looking where it was going. The result was chaos. Traders became more concerned with moving stocks to areas where control seemed least fierce, than with selling to the public. A few particularly outrageous profiteers were prosecuted, but convictions were still fewer and the punishments deterred no one.

In the midst of this muddle the newly constituted Economic Resources Board called a price control conference in New Delhi in October. The conference belied its name since it concluded that "there was a general feeling that price control should be relaxed as being no longer necessary for the bulk of goods.

"The conference generally agreed that as agricultural produce had not yet recovered fully from the recent depression, the agriculturist was entitled to an increased price. It was pointed out that in course of time the problem might become serious and that there might have to be imposed two limitations on the tendency for agricultural commodity prices to rise: the first with regard to the necessaries of life when prices rise so sharply as to bring about serious social discontent; the second with reference to Government supplies for war purposes when a steep rise in price would militate against an adequate war effort."

Beyond deciding that the provincial governments were the proper authorities to exercise control over commodity prices, if and when necessary, the conference did precisely nothing either to ensure that the agriculturist got his increased price or to guard consumers against over-sharp rises. Outside official circles, no one could understand how the legion of

middlemen, whose prices were not to be controlled, could pass on their extra profits to the grower, even if they were willing to do so. The average town merchant, to whom the consumer paid double the normal price, had already bought and paid for his stock from a wholesaler who had received it via several other middlemen from a dealer who had not only paid the grower but had a mortgage on next season's crop as well. On the other hand, Bombay had the bad taste(?) to start organising shops to sell grain at cheap rates to poor people, thus exploding the theory that the man in the street could afford to pay much more for his food.

Then the war bogged down behind the Maginot Line and Indian traders, readying the market for a repetition of 1917-18, found they had over-reached themselves. Wholesale market rates came down with a wallop. This fall was in many ways tragic. It seemed to confirm the views of those official observers who had speculation on the brain, and it provided most administrations with an excuse for doing no more about control. The scandalous fact, revealed in the previous six months, that a bunch of speculators could play ducks and drakes with the country's wartime food supply and might do so again, was ignored.

Moreover, Delhi and the anti-control school, non-official as well as official, rapidly fell into the comforting error of reading the wholesale market reports. This habit made confusion worse confounded, because in uncontrolled conditions what a merchant pays for wheat in Lyallpur need not bear any relation to what the average labourer has to pay in Bombay, or indeed to whether he can obtain any food at all. Such a state of affairs actually occurred a year later when in the early months of 1941 the wholesale wheat markets of North India tended to fall while Bombay ran short of food.

Under such conditions it was possible to put off the evil day of imposing control almost indefinitely and indeed the war had been in progress 28 months when

the first attempt was made to control wheat in December 1941. The level at which control became operative was illuminating—Rs. 4-6 in Lyallpur, or 101 per cent above the August 1939 price. Even that far from small dose of inflation lasted precisely 15 weeks, after which the control advanced to Rs. 5 at which it persisted till January 1943 when it was withdrawn and wheat reached nearly Rs. 11, or five times the pre-war rate. It seemed as though the theorists had created a Frankenstein.

As I have said, the theorists cannot be entirely blamed because their inflation brain-child got out of hand. The theory did not develop according to plan and early attempts to control its waywardness failed because of the absence of machinery to enforce any prices at all. The principle that the provinces should control commodity prices was maintained long after its usefulness was exhausted—assuming that it ever could have been of the slightest assistance. It was supposed that food prices were the key to the whole problem of India's wartime economy and that all other prices were relatively unimportant. Later events were to prove the fallacy of this attitude, but in the early period the failure to provide general and effective guidance for the prices of all commodities effectively robbed food price rises of any value they might otherwise have had for the ryot.

CHAPTER VI

DELHI THINKS IT OVER

Many tons of paper have already been used in explaining to India and the world the varying viewpoints on the feeding of India. But it seems to me that only when the whole series of official conferences held between 1939 and 1943 are treated as a connected story can we hope to understand the crabwise movements of the policy makers. There are few heart throbs in any record of official proceedings and if this chapter seems

more arid than usual I must crave the reader's indulgence while we diagnose those peculiar creaks and groans which the food machine emitted sporadically for nearly four years. Behind it all lies the great human story of India, the hundreds of millions of very puzzled, often very badly informed, people who were gradually losing hope that the wise men closeted behind the drab walls of a dozen secretariats would ever produce something to eat. It is a remarkable tribute to the resilience of the Indian character that even after the most extraordinary crises, confidence grew again within a few weeks or months.

The officials of course have had their difficulties and as usual it has often been easier to see what ought to be done than to do it. The real trouble seems to have been that in all the massive bureaucracy of India there was no single voice which could break the spell, wrought by generations of procedure and imposed by wartime rules and regulations. Lines of policy criss-crossed so crazily that until a courageous start was made, any scheme was bound to be such a mass of contradictions that another dozen conferences would be needed to resolve them.

For example, the so-called "constitutional" aspect of food. Under the 1935 Constitution the provinces had been made autonomous, and when war broke out this autonomy was being operated by popular ministries—India's first attempt at large scale self-government. By and large, the experiment was working out well. Indian politicians after half a lifetime of acidulated criticism of bureaucracy were gaining invaluable experience by doing the job themselves. It was understandable, therefore, that after the hurly-burly of the previous ten years Delhi and London should be particularly anxious not to set back this progress. The necessity of maintaining such a policy, in spite of every argument to the contrary (and at times there were plenty of them), proved for four years to be one of the biggest stumbling blocks in the food planners' path.

When the 1935 Constitution was evolved the likelihood that food would become an urgent all-India subject was not foreseen and consequently no direct provision was made for it. Therefore there was nothing to prevent Delhi from using its powers under the Defence of India Rules to lay down and enforce an all-India plan; nothing, that is, except the policy of respecting the autonomy of the provinces. Hence the abortiveness of the series of price control conferences which took place from 1939 to 1942. Delhi consulted the provinces and States—which were also regarded as autonomous in food matters. Certain principles, to which no one, except apparently Delhi, was bound, were enunciated and everyone went home and did nothing.

The tragedy was that these early, useless talks neither assisted the development of a coherent joint plan nor cleared the way for Delhi to act as a central directing authority. It is hardly surprising that confusion developed with astounding rapidity. As we have already noticed, Delhi gave the provinces power to control prices of certain essentials in September 1939. As a cure for minor and very localised outbreaks of profiteering such authority might conceivably have been sufficient; but what would happen if traders refused to sell, if they hid their stocks or pushed up price levels on a countrywide scale?

The official answer came in October 1939 when the first price control conference decided that agricultural prices were not high enough anyway. Price fixing would come when food became expensive enough to cause social discontent. This decision was very like allowing a car to gather speed down a steep hill without preparing to apply the brakes—or worse still without ensuring that the car had any brakes at all! The conference also sowed the seeds of much future trouble by deciding that the job of fixing prices belonged to the provincial governments. Just how that notion fitted in with the fact that the provinces bought food from each other was apparently never discussed.

Between the first Price Control Conference in October 1939 and the second in June 1940, wholesale prices of Indian food performed a wild zig-zag. During the early part of 1940 they climbed steeply, but by the time the June conference met they had fallen back. It was therefore the worst possible moment at which to persuade unwilling provincial administrators to get down to the business of price control. Once again, few provincial delegates would admit that prices needed control, and in the absence of anything better to do they occupied their time with devising still more intricate and quite useless principles. Delhi might control the primary wholesale market where necessary, but only after consulting the provinces concerned. The provinces and States would control the retail markets, if and when they felt inclined. They didn't.

Earlier in the year the Government of India had asked the provinces and States to set up machinery for liaison among themselves and with the Centre. This essential basis of any food plan was so little to anyone's taste that nothing was done. As late as 1943 Bengal had still not made her true position known.

It could of course be argued that the provinces often did not even know the real state of affairs within their own borders. But during the early years of the war deliberations were conducted as though every delegate had personal knowledge of, and control over, every grain of cereal in his area. Not until famine was stalking the land in 1943 did pompous theorising suddenly give way to self-abasement and admissions of ignorance on an unprecedented scale. Damaging as this change of front might be to morale, it at least enabled common sense to have a belated innings.

It is dangerous, however, to jump ahead of our story. When the second Price Control Conference was held in June 1940, the effects of the fall of France had not been fully felt in India. By October 1941, however, understanding had dawned only too clearly. Our old friend Lyallpur wheat was Rs. 4-4 a maund, Re. 1-11-9 above its price in June 1940, and Delhi thought it was time to

call the third Price Control Conference. But after the dashed hopes of the previous year (wholesale grain prices had gone for another switch-back ride) the delegates were in no mood to talk control. No one would agree that the new price rises needed supervision and some representatives even went so far as to assert that Delhi only wanted price control to assist exports. They complained about the importation of rice from Burma, while the Punjab disclosed its opposition to wheat control.

The then Commerce Member, Sir A. Ramaswami Mudaliar, worked hard to bring some semblance of sense into the gathering by reminding delegates that price levels were now causing hardship to the consumer and that this was the point at which previous conferences had agreed control was necessary. The delegates would have none of this and chattered about aid to the farmer when it was abundantly clear from the recent behaviour of the market that the middleman had pocketed the increase.

This conference had two contradictory effects. The first was the launching of the food exports legend which was to cause almost continuous trouble till it wore out in 1943 from constant use by every profiteer and political agitator who could lay hands on it. The second effect was the emergence of a definite policy in the Punjab. Though this province's refusal to kow-tow to the whims of the Imperial Secretariat caused savage bickering for two years, it probably forced Delhi, as nothing else could have done, to give up the habit of improvising a way through succeeding crises and to make up its mind once and for all on a general food policy.

In the meantime the shadow of future trouble had already fallen on Bombay, biggest of the Indian cities and the one furthest away from the main grainfields in Upper India. In April 1941 the city ran short of food and no organisation existed in the country to deal with the crisis. It was overcome by the simple expedient of insisting that the transport authorities rushed more food into the city, but it set people thinking. The most

constructive thinkers were of course the merchants who within two months carried retail prices to double pre-war levels. For a time food queues appeared, but the buying rush gradually wore itself out and matters apparently returned to normal. Nevertheless the speculator and the hoarder had begun to realise the potentialities of these sudden crises.

Following the failure of the October conference, Delhi began to show signs of acting on its own account, though the first move was ill-advised, to say the least. By an amendment of Defence of India Rule 81 the provinces were given further powers to control the movement of commodities, to fix prices and secure the availability of food. As Sir Azizul Huque was to explain two years later, "These powers were given only with a view to quick action being taken in an emergency. It was specially emphasised that these powers should not be exercised by the provinces without previous consultation with the Government of India. In the event of any such consultation not being possible owing to breakdown of communications or in any emergent situation demanding quick action, the Government of India desired that reference should be made immediately after to the Central Government."

In other words, this extreme economic autonomy was only to be used if the country was invaded or so disorganised by enemy action that the provincial administrations had to fend for themselves. The real difficulty was that however much Delhi might desire the provinces to consult it first, these powers were now in the provinces' hands and there was not a great deal that Delhi could do if the provinces decided to use them before a national emergency arose. Nor does it seem to have been clearly realised that once such powers had been delegated to the provinces, the Government of India had little chance of developing a uniform, country-wide food policy. When Delhi did attempt to assert itself some 18 months later, opponents of control alleged that such activities by the Centre were "unconstitutional".

wheat, but licensing of wholesale dealers with a similar provision for retailers if the provinces cared to use it. Wholesale dealers were to be licensed under the Food Grains Control Order issued in May.

To the optimist it might seem that the foundations of a thorough-going control scheme were now being laid; that if all the orders, Central and provincial, could be co-ordinated there was a chance that India would have a properly regulated food supply. But the sharp corners of unwelcome facts persisted in poking their way through the thin fabric of control. For example, it became apparent that overmuch attention was not being paid to the wheat control and that large numbers of clandestine deals were going on. Mysterious shortages developed. In the bigger towns food queues became a regular daily feature of life, with people returning day after day in the hope of being able to buy their quota before the shop's limited stock ran out. Soon it was discovered that more stock than the people could eat was being distributed each day, but still the demand soared. A new profession threatened to grow up: that of standing in queues outside control price shops to buy for the black market. Though nearly every official in the country had scouted its practicability, rationing was realised to be the only cure.

Before rationing could be safely introduced, however, it was necessary to take steps to ensure a regular flow of supplies through officially controlled channels to the rationed area. The first move in this direction came at the sixth Price Control Conference in September 1942, though it should be emphasised that the principle of rationing had not yet been officially considered. The conference did however reach the point of recommending that a single agency should be employed for all civilian and defence purchases. This step was intended to eliminate the market dislocation caused by the activities of army contractors who, armed with their priorities, were capable of cutting clean across all civilian arrangements. Other recommendations included the prohibition of the export of wheat from surplus provinces on private account, and purchases

by the Central Government from the surplus provinces for distribution to deficit areas. The governing principle in all measures under conditions of shortage was to be equality of sacrifice. The delegates again reiterated their view that there should be the least interference with the normal channels of distribution.

Now that provincial delegates had left no doubt about the necessity of Delhi playing its part in food administration, the establishment of a Central Food Department (December 1942) was not long in following. Unfortunately, the new department was not provided with a separate portfolio but was attached to the Commerce Member who had already been responsible for the Price Control Conferences.

This remark is in no way a reflection on the ability of Mr. N. R. Sarker, the then Commerce Member. Indeed, both he and his successor, Sir Azizul Huque, are men whose experience of food matters is considerable and whose administrative records are excellent. But the Commerce Department of the Government of India is surely the most crowded administrative pantechnicon the world has ever seen. It embraces everything from Lighthouses to the Sugar Controller, plus the Superintendent of Insurance, the Nautical Adviser, the Textile Commissioner, the Industries and Civil Supplies Department, the Chief Controller of Imports, the Economic Adviser, Scientific and Industrial Research and the Controller of Patents. To expect one man to control this heterogeneous mass of activity plus an urgent subject like food is surely asking too much. The Food Department was associated with the Commerce Department for seven months, until in July 1943 it was put in charge of Sir Jwala Prasad Srivastava as a separate portfolio.

During those seven months, however, two Commerce Members, in spite of their lighthouses and patents registers, had contrived to make some headway in an almost impossible situation. The first Food Conference was held in December 1942 and a scheme showing how much food the various provinces could spare or needed

was put forward. The plan was admitted to be an estimate because most of the major provinces had not replied to an earlier request to give a forecast of their production, surpluses and deficiencies. More information was forthcoming at the conference and it became clear that the country would be short of wheat during the next four months. Immediate steps were taken to secure wheat from abroad and its arrival undoubtedly prevented a very serious crisis.

As for the most important business of procuring supplies for the deficit areas, the conference decided to leave procurement in the hands of the provinces; Delhi to be responsible merely for moving the grain to the deficit areas. This left Delhi in a completely false position and the deficit areas at the mercy of the surplus provinces. The conference also recommended the removal of the wheat control. This was done and the price immediately doubled.

Then came the preparation of a basic plan for all provinces and States in order to balance deficiencies against surpluses. The idea was carried a stage further at the second Food Conference in February 1943 when it was agreed that all provinces should establish procurement organisations to bring local surpluses under official control. The plan broke down almost at once because the provinces interpreted the plan as it suited them, the net result being that maximum procurement was not undertaken and the Centre was not kept informed of the position.

Driven to desperation, the Government of India then took a step which must be unique in the annals of administration. They attempted to throw the whole food control machine into reverse by introducing free trade in the Eastern Zone which included Bihar, Orissa, Bengal and Assam. This happened in May, when Bengal's condition was beginning to look desperate. The intention was to permit a free flow of food into the deficit area and it was claimed that had free trade been allowed to develop without obstruction, price levels in

the whole of the Eastern region would have fallen after some temporary disturbance of the market.

The scheme failed because the local authorities in the provinces adjoining Bengal feared that Calcutta speculators would strip them bare and spread famine far and wide. They therefore obstructed grain movements as far as lay within their power. Not content with that, Delhi prepared to spread free trade in food over the rest of the country. Exactly why the Food Department assumed that it could go counter to experience not only in India but in the rest of the world, will perhaps never be known. Fortunately, the all-India scheme was never put into operation while the Eastern Zone was brought back under control before too much damage had been done.

Later, when a more accurate survey of food conditions was made, the country's total deficiency became clearer; so also did the tremendous power of the speculative element in the grain market. Under such conditions free trade meant free fortunes for hoarders. These attempts to feed India by experiment caused such a storm of protest that the third Food Conference in July decided without any hesitation that free trade in food must be left till after the war. In its place the conference recommended reversion to the original procurement plan, with arithmetical adjustments, functioning under the Government of India and with purchasing organisations under the provincial governments.

The Government of India accepted these recommendations and set up the revised basic plan to distribute 1,400,000 tons of food grains between August 1943 and March 1944. Delhi also appointed a Food Grains Policy Committee to make recommendations on food policy and administration for securing, for the duration of the war, maximum supply, equitable distribution and proper control of prices in relation to food grains.

In the meantime the separate Food Department with Sir Jwala Prasad Srivastava as its Member was set up.

Its first task was of course the Bengal famine and there is no doubt that owing to the energy displayed by Delhi, before even the Food Grains Policy Committee had time to recommend a policy, much was done to relieve distress. The reasons why this relief was not complete must await a separate chapter; so must the details of the Food Grains Policy Committee's report. However, its main recommendations—statutory price control, rationing, more determined procurement and a stronger policy by Delhi—soon began to show results. The first signs that the Government of India had made up their mind was the direction to the Government of Sind, in November, not to alter their controlled prices without consent from the Centre. The Sind Ministers professed great indignation that they, who had maintained price control through thick and thin, should be given such orders, but Delhi's action undoubtedly prevented the zamindars and speculators from breaking down a system which has saved the province from inflation. A month later the Bengal Government received orders to set up rationing in Calcutta by January 31. Such a direction was hardly unexpected; the provincial administration had dilly-dallied over this step for at least two months.

Finally, the Punjab agreed to support statutory price control. As 1943 ended, India's wartime food machine seemed to be running smoothly at last.

CHAPTER VII

GROW MORE FOOD

During the spring of 1942, when the Japanese were pushing their way relentlessly through Burma and food supply difficulties were springing up like mushrooms in India, Delhi suddenly decided to launch a "Grow More Food" drive. Thus on April 6 Mr. N. R. Sarker met the delegates of the provinces and States at a Food Production Conference, during which he treated them to a masterly, if somewhat optimistic,

review of Indian food production and the deficiencies which would have to be met as a result of losing Burma's rice. The goal set for the whole country was nothing very staggering—a four per cent increase in food acreage (7,000,000 acres) and 1,700,000 tons of extra food. But the hour was late—very late—since the conference took place less than eight weeks before the monsoon crops were to be sown. The whole campaign seemed to be months behind time, no matter how many government house flower beds sprouted bajri or dak bungalow compounds were ploughed up for rice.

Of course the inevitable bogeys were raised. How, it was asked, could a man who had grown short staple cotton all his life, be made to switch over to food. Increased production would be unpopular because the growers would fear a glut and low prices. Where was the seed? If the increase required was so small, why bother with it at all? Variations of sowings from years to year were greater than four per cent. It was not long before some of India's more popular theorists had proved to their own satisfaction that the scheme was an injustice to the ryots; that it would fail; and that there were much more important things to think about, anyway. If the minor officials, sweating round the villages under the broiling May sun, trying to convert slow thinking ryots from generations of bad cotton to a new year of good food, read their newspapers they must have felt discouraged. Generally speaking, the drive, like most agricultural matters, had a poor-press—especially among the Indian owned papers. Compared with Mr. Gandhi's movements, the business of saving the country from starvation ran a bad second.

However, we should not be unduly concerned with what the towns thought; food, after all, is grown in the villages and with the very few weeks at their disposal, before monsoon sowing began, many provincial agricultural departments did a remarkable job of work. The effect, seen in the perspective of India's real needs, was not earth-shaking, but the idea that

more food was needed was certainly in the villagers' heads before the monsoon broke. Considering that in Bombay alone there were 400,000 acres of short staple cotton land available for millets and pulses, if the growers could be converted in time, haste was well worth while.

Bombay provided an excellent example of what could be done. Pamphlets warning growers against sowing short staple cotton (at a discount since the Japanese market closed), and explaining the profit in millets were rushed into the villages All the regional languages were used and in order to ensure that the message reached even the illiterate, village schoolmasters assisted in spreading the new rural gospel of "More food crops mean full pockets and full stomachs." Sub-standard educational films on the subject were sent on tour, ballad singers were engaged, village meetings were organised and cotton market leaders gave radio addresses appealing to the business sense of the villagers in the cotton areas. This propaganda was followed up by more solid inducements—a guarantee by the Government of India that if food crop prices showed signs of falling below an economic level they would come to the rescue. Provincial agricultural departments offered special rates for irrigation of food crops, remissions in land revenue on new land brought under cultivation for food, increased quantities of improved seed and interest-free loans.

During 1942-43 the Central Government granted more than Rs. 18 lakhs to the provinces to finance the campaign. In 1943-44 the grant was over Rs. 16 lakhs plus nearly a crore of rupees as loans for the same purpose. Another loan of about Rs. 12 crores was made available in 1943-44 to the provinces to buy food grains and finally a third loan of Rs 5 crores was given to the provinces for general purposes, a part of which was understood to be for agricultural assistance.

What was the immediate result? The 1942-43 crop year, the first in which the drive had effect, showed

an all-India increase of 8,500,000 acres under Kharif food crops and wheat alone. In other words, 1,500,000 acres more land than expected was devoted to food. Of course much more important than the area of land utilised was the amount of food actually produced. Here, however, we are at the mercy of the elements, because such a vast proportion of India's arable land is watered by the monsoon that a failure of these rains can nullify all the efforts made by man. But in spite of the very patchy monsoon of 1942, which caused a failure of millet crops in Bombay and partial failure of both millets and rice in Madras, the harvest of all food grains was generally good and would have been much better, but for the October 1942 cyclone in Bengal which is estimated to have destroyed 1,500,000 tons of rice.

If we take the case of wheat, we have a fairly clear picture of what happened. The all-India acreage in 1942-43 showed a disappointing increase of only 0.4 per cent over the previous year's crop. In the Punjab and its States—the premier wheat growing area—acreage increased by 522,000. Unfortunately the next three most important wheat growers—the United Provinces, the Central Provinces and Bombay—reduced their acreages by 831,000. All the same, the estimated wheat production for all-India in 1942-43 was 10,938,000 tons, an increase of nine per cent over 1941-42 and an additional 948,000 tons for the country's food grain stocks. Thus the wheat crop alone yielded more than half the amount needed to give India the extra 1,700,000 tons of food proposed for the drive. Those are the facts of the first year of the "Grow More Food" campaign. It did not fail.

However, it is futile to juggle with crop statistics if parts of the country are famine stricken. As we have noted in earlier chapters, India's real requirements involve not four per cent but forty per cent more food. That is the ultimate target and until it is achieved the drive to grow more food must remain a feature of Indian rural life, war or no war. For 1943-44 the scope

of operations was widened to include 10,000,000 acres of Kharif (monsoon) food crops such as rice and millet, and 1,350,000 extra acres under Rabi (winter) crops—wheat, barley etc. These acreages were to be additional to the 1936-39 averages.

What is being done to ensure that this drive succeeds?

When the food drive was launched short staple cotton was in the doldrums along with other cash crops such as oilseeds and sugar cane, so food crops were relatively attractive. Later events were to prove, however, that all the inducements and propaganda offered by the provincial agricultural departments could not compete with a rise in the market. On the one hand, Bengal's record rice crop in 1943 was undoubtedly due to the high prices growers hoped to get. On the other, the frantic speculation in cotton in Bombay early in 1943 certainly endangered the provincial food drive. Until gur (village made sugar) was controlled, its steadily rising price attracted United Provinces' farmers to grow sugar cane for this purpose rather than for refined sugar, and this premium on cane growing inevitably had its effect on cereal crops. Consequently in assessing results we have to decide whether success means reaching a certain limited target in any particular year or whether we expect the drive to stabilise food production permanently on a greatly increased scale. If the second aim be the case, it is apparent that the food drive has not yet succeeded.

As Sir Manilal B. Nanavati, ex-Deputy Governor of the Reserve Bank of India, put it: " 'The Grow More Food' campaign is practically a failure, and was bound to be so because no attention was paid to the parity between the prices of non-food crops and those of food crops. So long as the grower of food crops is not assured of a fair price for his produce—'fair' in relation to the price of non-food crops as also with reference to his cost of production and minimum needs—there is no real incentive to the farmer."

High prices to the customer do not necessarily mean a good return to the grower and without doubt it must be part of any food plan to ensure that the producer gets due encouragement. Much the same difficulty has been experienced among the other United Nations, and Great Britain and the U. S. A. have tried to solve the problem of keeping consumer prices down and production up by subsidising the farmer. This method has already been employed to a small extent in India by concession rates for seeds and irrigation and in Madras and Bombay by subsidising supplies of manure.. It is evident, nevertheless, that the scale of subsidy is still too small.

A new development which must vitally affect the progress of food growing is of course the policy of fixing price ceilings for food crops and of buying up a proportion of them through official procurement schemes. In areas where the middleman has taken a very large share of increased prices, the new procedure will prove attractive to the grower. Elsewhere he may try to evade the restrictions by reverting to cash crops. Thus the questions arise whether by controlling both the price and acreage of cash crops the authorities can prevent their food plans being upset and whether they can supply the consumer goods needed by the grower at such prices that food grain ceilings will remain attractive. The Indian price machine is nowadays so dislocated that further development of any form of agriculture depends on supplies of implements and working cattle at prices the farmer can afford. The "Grow More Food" drive is certainly not merely a matter of brightly coloured posters and a few limited concessions.

That the future requires a great deal more than anything attempted in the past is proved by the fact that, in spite of efforts in 1942 and 1943, the food situation has steadily deteriorated. Where has the extra grain grown in 1942 and 1943 gone? When the scheme was launched it was criticised because it might cause local gluts and a fall in prices. The reverse has happened.

No glut has been reported and prices have risen steadily. Such a phenomenon means either that India's farm statistics generally are so unreliable that deficits and surpluses are purely imaginary; that the Grow More Food drive has produced a minus quantity of grain, or that consumption is running ahead of production. A final possibility is that hoarding and maldistribution have prevented a colossal amount of grain from reaching the consumer.

Since it is unlikely that the "Grow More Food" drive has actually discouraged food growing or that statistics are not even approximate indicators of the position, we are forced back to the last two possibilities: Greater consumption and hoarding, which are the two most likely reasons. Hoarding can undoubtedly put large quantities of grain out of circulation for a time, but increased consumption is a permanent condition requiring permanently increased production to satisfy it.

These facts were evidently recognised by the Food Grains Policy Committee who state in their report, "While the Committee appreciate the efforts which have been made so far for the intensification of the 'Grow More Food' campaign, they feel that a greater effort is needed to meet the grave situation which confronts the country to-day. They are convinced that the only satisfactory solution of the food problem lies in assuring abundant supplies for all, which under existing conditions is feasible in the main only by increasing the production in the country itself."

The Committee accordingly made 14 recommendations for growing more food. They were:—

1. Government should encourage the large scale distribution of improved seed.
2. Steps should be taken by Government to promote the production of compost from night soil and town refuse.
3. Assistance should be afforded for the importation of plant and with the giving of technical

advice for the manufacture of at least 350,000 tons of ammonium sulphate a year.

4. Provinces and States to promote with all energy and expedition such irrigation and drainage schemes as promise quick results.
5. Prevent depletion of India's serviceable milch and draught cattle by the vigorous enforcement of prohibitions against the slaughter of cows in milk and pregnant cows or fit working cattle under 10 years of age.
6. An adequate quota of iron and steel, required for the replacement and repair of worn out or defective farm implements.
7. Importation of tractors and other farm implements.
8. Farmers to be able to secure such fuel and lubricating oil as they require.
9. No further delay in empowering provincial governments to regulate crop production and compel the cultivation of waste lands.
10. Accelerated land settlement in Assam.
11. Under-milling of rice in all rice provinces.
12. Assist rice mills in obtaining mill stores (in order to maintain full output).
13. Provincial and State Governments to increase the strength of their agricultural departments immediately. (The Committee regarded their staffs as inadequate to cope with the work required of them).
14. Research schemes with a bearing on short-range problems of food production to be adequately endowed.

These recommendations are a very different story from the initial plans put forward 18 months earlier. It will be noticed that they contain no recommendations about production targets. Instead, the call is for an unlimited production drive.

How do the Committee's recommendations meet known requirements?

A survey of farming conditions in Bombay province undertaken by *The Times of India* in August 1943 showed results which agree closely with the Committee's conclusions. Conditions in Bombay at that date may be summarised as follow:—

1. In spite of considerable supplies provided by the provincial agricultural department, the amount of improved seed available did not satisfy the demand.
2. A very serious shortage of any form of manure or fertiliser. Oilcake (a valuable manure) prices were beyond the reach of nearly all farmers. (The Bombay Government have since improved matters by subsidising supplies).
3. Further expansion, especially in dry areas, depended on the provision of irrigation.
4. Grave shortage of working cattle, livestock prices having risen anything from 200 to 400 per cent. (The Bombay Government have since enforced the ban on slaughter).
5. Growing difficulties over carts and implements owing to shortage and high cost of metal parts. Farmers were repairing worn out implements but efficiency was being lowered and repairs could not prevent the situation from growing worse.
6. Waste land being cultivated only to a limited extent, mainly because of seed, livestock and implement shortages, though in some areas official slowness in granting permission and the necessary loans was blamed.
7. Only a limited share of increased prices had gone to the growers, subject to wide local variations. The almost continuous rise in food grain prices had certainly encouraged food growing but had also put a premium on

withholding crops from market as long as possible.

8. The rural cost of living had advanced so rapidly that in many areas it had overtaken the improved prices for crops.

Much the same state of affairs has been reported elsewhere in the country. It is only too evident that the business of increasing the country's food production and making it available to the consumer is much more complicated than might at first be supposed. It is also likely to cost more than the 15 pies per head of population which was annually devoted to the welfare of the land, its produce and livestock, until very recently.

CHAPTER VIII

THE HARVEST OF POLITICS

So far we have considered the development of India's food crisis purely from the economic angle. On the other hand, over the past few years politics has occupied such a large proportion of the thoughts of educated Indians that it would be surprising indeed if party programmes had no bearing at all on the food situation.

In relating political events to the food situation it is not my object to throw blame on any particular party or personality, but merely to state the facts and opinions which I have been able to gather. One of the most recent commentaries on the subject was made by Sir Manilal Nanavati who remarked that: "The co-operation of the people with the Government in this (food) crisis is, to say the least, inadequate." Such a statement cannot be denied, nor is the reason for the lack of co-operation far to seek. For 20 years certain groups of Indian politicians have sedulously trained their followers to adopt a hostile attitude towards every official move; to resist where possible and to act

as uncompromising, and even destructive critics. Therefore, even apart from any more positive guidance on the subject, large groups of people were already conditioned to oppose official attempts to organise food distribution. In turn, they had trained the general public to doubt any advice officials gave. When this attitude was coupled with a feeling that the United Nations might not win the war, as it was in 1941 and 1942, the psychological problem alone was enormous. The people had been stirred to the idea of resistance, but they were as likely to defy Delhi as Tokio. Moreover it is futile to deny that this attitude did not fit in with the schemes which culminated in the "Quit India" resolution. What happened after that resolution was passed may be an entirely different matter; at the moment I am merely trying to analyse the atmosphere in which the early stages of the food crisis developed. It was not propitious to a quick and easy solution.

Of course it can be objected that, at any rate during the early months of rising prices, Indian political parties were in power in the provinces and that they accepted the task of enforcing a certain measure of price control. The plain fact is that until the Congress Governments resigned office, very little progress in this direction was made. Such delay was not entirely their fault; the general mentality in the country was against too strict control. On the other hand, a great many supporters of the Congress regime, if not the Ministers themselves, persisted in regarding the whole problem as a question of market operations. Many of them would have preferred, and would still prefer, to dispense altogether with strict control. Again, there is something in the Indian character which regards rules and regulations as things to be evaded. It may be due to lack of discipline in youth or the effect of many centuries of obedience to autocratic local rulers. Anyway, the immediate reaction to a new rule, however essential it may be for the public good, is violent protest against its justice or even necessity, followed by persistent efforts to dodge its effects or even to ignore

it. They see nothing inconsistent in doing this after violently criticising the administrators for not controlling the situation.

This extraordinary attitude (extraordinary to the Western mind) explains why the Indian public would hardly protest against the most outrageous profiteering. On the one hand, profiteering was held to be just another evidence of Government's incapacity to administer the country; on the other, profiteers had an almost heroic quality because they evaded established authority.

Apart from this basic attitude, it cannot be said that the educated classes take much interest in the country's fundamental economics. The rural areas in which the food is produced are devoid of interest to those who have found employment in the large towns. Educated India has not yet produced a Cobbett or a Coke. Bengali writers may make a cult of the village hut, but they do it from the comfort of a Calcutta flat. As Sir Jogendra Singh, Member of the Viceroy's Executive Council for Education, Health and Lands, confessed to the Council of State in August 1943: "We, the educated classes, have done little to improve rural conditions and modern production."

Probably this lack of sympathy between the politically minded classes and the main body of the people, prevented the outbreak of a real mass movement early in 1942, months before the "Quit India" resolution was passed. Those people who paid attention to what was happening in the country became increasingly urgent in their warnings that the food position was deteriorating so rapidly that dangerous political capital might easily be made out of it. In time this idea took root in Delhi, which thereupon most unjustly blamed the provinces for not obviating the risk by making price control successful.

It matters very little to me which group organised the disturbances following the arrest of the Congress leaders in August of that year. The fact is that an attempt was made to raise rebellion in the country and that in some areas a good deal of spadework had been

done before Congress met in Bombay. Whether the people who did this work belonged to Congress or to the Forward Bloc or were just ordinary Fifth Columnists I shall not presume to judge, though I hope for everyone's sake we shall know the truth one day.

The point I wish to make is that unless the public at large has confidence in the government of the country to preserve law and order, to carry into effect such laws as it may make, and to redeem its promises, any kind of administration which depends to some extent on public co-operation becomes virtually impossible. This condition is particularly applicable to food and price control since every member of the public is concerned.

Now an examination of events in 1942 will show that from early in the year, the gospel that the existing regime at Delhi was likely to disappear was fairly consistently preached. The issue of paper rupees provided a particularly handy talking point. Villagers, unused to handling any kind of money at all, were told to sell their produce only for old silver rupees which were becoming illegal tender. Paper notes, they were told, would soon be worthless. To drive home this point politically minded shopkeepers and money lenders hoarded coins and would only change paper money at a discount. The main idea was of course to cause the maximum amount of embarrassment to Government. The main effect was to embarrass the public and shorten food supplies by encouraging growers to hoard their stocks. Naturally, political agitators were not long alone in the field. Unscrupulous traders soon adopted the same tactics for the sake of making another anna or two—and added to the prevailing confusion.

Another tactic was to foment the looting of grain shops. Some of these cases may have been spontaneous, but on the whole they received encouragement from some mysterious quarter.

Anyway, such affairs made excellent anti-Government propaganda and served to disquiet the public

still more. A variant of this method was to spread the rumour that Government or the Army were about to requisition crops and would not leave any for the grower and his family; again causing dislocation in the movement of supplies. I came across particularly bad cases of this in Eastern Bengal where speculators followed the agitators and fleeced the countryside.

After the arrest of Mr. Gandhi the movement became much more open and developed into a sabotage campaign designed to reduce administration to chaos. Here again, the organisers hurt the public far more than the authorities and succeeded in holding up the movement of large quantities of food at a vital period. Worse still, food traders went on a two months' hartal in several large centres, including Bombay. Such activities only intensified food difficulties in the main consuming areas. A peculiar feature of mob violence in Bombay was the burning and looting of Government grain shops, which for days on end were the main source of supply for the public. Indeed, as late as December there were disturbances on "Mahadev Desai Day" when the chief feature was an attack on a grain shop.

The general impression I have of the last five months of 1942 is that whoever was responsible for disturbing the country either did not care a rap how much the Indian public suffered or else intended deliberately to attack their interests.

To what extent was the food position directly damaged, apart from the burning of crops and the looting of grain shops?

It was summed up for me at the close of the year by a banker who was in unusually close touch with the grain trade. In fact my interview was sandwiched between calls by a couple of grain magnates who had given up the hartal and were borrowing heavily to start trading again.

"The liquidation of their commitments in August by so many merchants and their refusal to do business until October, have had a very bad effect on the food position," the banker told me. He said the merchants

had been able to close down business for so long because profits during the rest of the year had been excellent. He added: "About seventy-five per cent of the population is apathetic while about five per cent is busily attempting to paralyse the administration of the country. Most of the forces at Government's disposal are employed in combatting this campaign and consequently they cannot enforce food control efficiently. At least, they cannot be as thorough as they could were there no disturbances.

"One of the worst features of the present campaign is that it is undoubtedly causing hunger to a large number of people." He considered that the time had come for all political parties to leave Government free to alleviate the condition of the poor.

The 1942 disturbances thus had a two-fold effect. The direct one of destroying food and the means of moving and distributing it, and the indirect but no less effective result of giving the profiteer, hoarder and speculator a fairly free run by tying up the forces of supervision for about five months. Also, the gospel of defiance of authority took effect far beyond the political sphere and encouraged every petty shopkeeper in his anti-social ways.

The main political clash came between Government and the fomenters of rebellion, but there were secondary political controversies which have made confusion worse confounded so far as the people's food is concerned. Of these the most shocking was the bitter struggle between Sir Nazimuddin and his Ministers on the one side and Mr. A. K. Fazlul Haq and Dr. S. P. Mookerjee on the other in Bengal in 1943. For months these undoubtedly gifted politicians wasted their time in the exchange of recriminations while the province drifted into famine. Mr. Haq had been Premier when Bengal's food troubles began and for months after he resigned both he and his ex-colleague, Dr. Mookerjee, lost no opportunity of harassing the Nazimuddin Government, during whose term the actual famine occurred.

When I met Dr. Mookerjee in Calcutta at the height

of the famine he immediately began to explain how badly the Nazimuddin administration were handling affairs and how the Fazlul Haq cabinet could have saved the situation, though to make his case it was necessary also to blame the former Governor, the late Sir John Herbert.

When I put it to Dr. Mookerjee that neither administration had had a very clear idea of what they were doing, he agreed that that was approximately correct. At that time, his party, the Hindu Mahasabha, were particularly loud in their demand for an immediate inquiry into the circumstances of the famine. When I suggested that the first job was to feed the people and restore confidence so that something like normal distribution could be resumed, Dr. Mookerjee could only reply that he must continue to agitate for an inquiry.

My general impression of Bengal politicians was that there was no thought of a party truce to save the province.

The famine was much too good an opportunity to score a debating point. Of course none of them suffered personally from food shortage.

Perhaps the most curious outcome of this food and politics muddle was in Sind where ministries are usually notoriously unstable. There the Premier, Sir Ghulam Hussain Hidayatallah, in spite of an Assembly full of zamindars all avid for high prices, enforced internal grain price control, sold the province's surplus at all-India rates and put the profit into a much needed provincial development fund. It was the one bright spot in an otherwise shockingly murky set up.

CHAPTER IX

RUPEES Vs. RICE

"The rupee to-day will only buy six annas' worth of goods;" "New spending power is pouring into the country at the rate of a crore of rupees a day;" "People are fleeing from money to goods". These and other pseudo-economic catchphrases went the rounds of In-

dian business circles in 1942 and 1943. Many otherwise sane merchants believed in them implicitly or used them as convenient excuses.

Economics is a dry and at times highly theoretical subject and I do not propose to drag more of it into this chapter than is essential. But no survey of how the food crisis developed would be complete without a mention of India's money troubles. The crux of the matter is that since 1942, when the struggle with Japan got into its stride and India became a major base, Indians have had more money than they know what to do with. The reason for this rather surprising statement is that while the United Nations have been spending vast sums of money here on everyone from millowners to coolies building aerodromes, India has only been able to respend these sums on limited amounts of goods, whether motor cars from abroad, saris from Benares or wheat from the Punjab.

The method of payment has assisted the process of putting more rupees into unaccustomed pockets. For example, suppose the R.A.F. decide to spend £100,000 (Rs. 13 lakhs) on building an aerodrome in East Bengal. Most of that money will be paid to Indians either for the hire of machinery, or for wages, food for the workers or what have you. By arrangement between the Treasuries of Delhi and London, sterling, or sterling securities to the value of £100,000, are paid in London to the Reserve Bank of India, who are the Government of India's agents. In order to pay the people who have actually earned the money, an equivalent sum in rupees must be paid out in East Bengal. If the Reserve Bank had no stock of rupees in India it would be necessary to create new rupees—i.e., print them—in order to make this payment. There is nothing wrong in doing this because the Reserve Bank possesses the necessary legal power, if it also holds adequate security with which to back its rupees. This security is provided by the sterling payment to it in London.

Of course in actual practice the Reserve Bank does not create new money every time it pays bills for the United Nations Governments who deposit sterling with it. A certain number of rupees are constantly returning to it via payments to the Government of India who treat the Reserve Bank as their banker. But it is evident that a good deal of new money will have to be created in a period of intense governmental activity such as the present war, and especially when the funds of more than one government are being spent in the country.

At first glance it would seem a very good thing that large numbers of comparatively poor people are today receiving more money than they ever had in their lives. They ought to be prosperous, eat better food, buy their children more shoes, their wives more bangles and themselves more bidis. And so they could, if only three or four out of every hundred decided to spend their money in this way. But when they all go shopping together local supplies start to run short, the manufacturers and merchants cannot meet the demand or they find the demand so enthusiastic that they can charge more.

But look at it from the other angle—the amount of supplies available. Much of the country's manufacturing capacity and nearly all its imports are devoted to war materials which the general public cannot buy. Consequently there are fewer things in the shops for the people to buy with their new found wealth, and so the prices go up.

That is a very rough sketch of how price inflation begins. Of course the prudent man will say that this extra money should not be spent in a time of scarcity; it should be saved until peace returns. So it should. But it is difficult to make people—especially people not already sated with the good things of life—see the wisdom of this. Moreover, unless the saving is fairly general, there will be enough spenders to push up the

general level of prices, thus forcing everyone to pay out more for bare necessities. The only forces which can prevent this are enlarged supplies of goods or price control.

Obviously, this "inflationary cycle" will first make its appearance among goods in the greatest demand, and that means food and clothes; there have been swift rises of anything up to 400 per cent in these prices in nearly all parts of the country. When we recall the comparative undernourishment of much of India, the people's capacity for more food is very large indeed. Even without transport difficulties, speculation, hoarding and bad crops, the mere increase of the people's power to buy food would cause acute shortage unless there were a corresponding increase in the volume of supplies. That increase has not yet taken place.

So far we have examined what may happen if the so-called economic forces are allowed to operate by themselves, without any artificial stimulation from any of the interested parties. But of course that never happens; a merchant who realises that prices are tending to rise will do his best to help them on their way. If his business is big enough he may attempt to corner the market by buying up all available supplies and thus create an artificial scarcity. If he cannot do that, he may simply refuse to sell his own stocks for the time being, in the hope that the general feeling in the market will send prices higher. All these things have happened in India where fairly frequent local shortages or even famines long ago taught merchants that prices can be driven up.

Now when we talked about everyone receiving more money than usual we should have added that those people who dealt in commodities or services which were steadily growing dearer would receive relatively more than wage earners. In other words, the bigger the volume of business the more money likely to be received. Consequently the rising cost of articles essential to life have little effect—relatively—on such

business men. They have more and more surplus money. For this surplus they will seek the most profitable investment and at a time when all forms of goods are steadily rising in price, a bale of cloth or a bag of wheat, which may double in value in six months, brings in more money than shares paying a steady ten or even twenty per cent a year. Thus so-called "investment buying", another powerful force, comes into the market to assist in pushing prices upwards and in reducing the amount of goods available. We know in the case of cloth that this form of speculation actually created an artificial famine early in 1943.

Finally, there is panic buying by people who genuinely believe that the currency system is unsafe and that goods are more likely to retain their value. We do not know how much real panic buying took place in India in 1942 and 1943 but we do know that the ground was prepared for it by a good deal of misguided criticism of Government's money policy. Economic pundits noticing the increasing amount of rupees in circulation and the steadily rising prices, put two and two together and made half a crore. According to them the rupee was not only losing its value but investors were fleeing from money to goods (which contention was supposed to explain the rise in prices). Because sterling balances formed such a large part of the new rupees' backing they professed to believe that the rupee would become worthless, since that was what was to happen to sterling as soon as the wartime exchange controls were removed. Why the British pound should become worthless they could not explain and it soon became evident that this theorising was based more on prejudice against Britain than on actual facts.

According to the scaremongers the rupee had become so inflated that India was rapidly approaching the condition of Germany in the early nineteen-twenties, which meant also that the rupee would become worthless overseas. How these fears squared with the facts that rupees still bought pounds and

dollars at the pre-war exchange rate and that India possessed in the Reserve Bank's sterling balances more foreign exchange than she had ever had before, no one could explain. Their only cures for the situation were the quite impossible notions that (a) enough ships and factories in Britain and America must be diverted from the war effort to allow India to import what goods she wished, (b) gold instead of sterling credits must be sent to India (at the height of the U-Boat campaign) or (c) Britain and America must pay their bills here by raising rupee loans inside the country.

The third idea was perhaps the most sensible, except for the undoubted fact that the Indian investing public had been well schooled not to subscribe to the war effort. The results of the Government of India's own loan programmes in that period showed that if the United Nations' defence of India against Japan was to wait upon Indian finance switching its interests from 200 per cent profits in rice and cloth to three per cent on war loan, progress would be slow indeed.

So far as we are concerned, the upshot of all this rather perverted economic theorising was to shake confidence in the value of money and to provide all the extra excuses required by people who wished to profiteer, withhold their stocks or hoard Moreover they now had sufficient money to do these things. In this respect Delhi was slow off the mark in not making greater efforts either to tax or borrow the surpluses or keep markets under control. The year 1943 saw the first determined measures in this direction and almost immediately prices ceased to soar. Some of them even began to fall back, completely contradicting idle fancies about the flight from the rupee and "galloping inflation." This process inevitably had some effect on food levels since stable or falling prices do not continue to attract the investor nor do they encourage the producer to withhold his crops from market in the hope of getting a better return later on.

In earlier chapters we referred to the general belief that slight inflation would be good for the food grower, but an examination of what actually happened shows that this was very far from the case except in isolated areas. The middleman who did all the bleating about the falling value of the rupee made the lion's share of the profit.

Bengal of course presents an extreme case but the results there give an idea of what could happen even in areas where margins were less wide. Very early in 1943 Bengal rice speculators were willing to pay eight to ten rupees a maund to growers for their rice. It looked like a fortune in the villages, because it was double the normal price. Later the villagers starved because often they had been tempted to sell too much. Six months later the officially controlled rate of rice in Bengal was Rs. 22-8 which meant a profit of at least 125 per cent; but no one paid much attention to official prices and levels ranged between Rs. 35 and Rs. 100. One needed to be only a very moderate speculator to triple or quadruple one's outlay in six months. Even wheat in the Punjab, where they had more grain than they wanted, doubled in price when control was removed.

In Western India much the same tale can be told. In the Belgaum district of Bombay rice growers sold their 1942 paddy crop at two annas a seer (pre-war rate: one anna); a few months later in the same district paddy was four annas a seer—when available. In the State of Baroda it was reckoned that merchants made 100 per cent on food crops in the 1942-43 season. In Surat they made far more than that on paddy, while in West Khandesh only ten per cent of the growers were estimated to have received any advantage at all. In the meantime, oilcake for manure had risen to four times its normal price, bullocks cost four or five times more than they did, while even a second-hand cart, which used to fetch Rs. 70, sold for Rs. 300.

In the towns, where the consumers had to provide the extra money taken by everyone else, there would

have been stark famine had not Government and employers come to the rescue by paying dearness allowances. During 1943 matters came to such a pass in Bombay that a millworker who normally earned Rs. 18 a month was being paid Rs. 48-6 which when the controlled price of rice stood at about two and a half times the prewar level, was not exorbitant.

In the battle of Rupees versus Rice, the Rupees were winning all along the line.

CHAPTER X

SURPLUS AND DEFICIT

A somewhat tattered individual stands on a mound overlooking the village fields. Most of the crops are three-quarters grown and they stretch away from his feet to well-known marks where the next village begins. Some of the fields are hidden behind clumps of trees; some have only a low growth where a villager has delayed sowing or has used a late variety.

The man on the mound shades his eyes. Ram's field is as full as he has ever seen it; Dondu's is not so good, but Dondu always was lazy about ploughing.

"Aye, brothers," says the man peering further afield, "a good season; a fourteen anna crop this time."

The little group of farmers around him dispute this assertion hotly, for he is the village chowkidar (watchman) and his estimate of what the village fields have produced will determine the amount of revenue their holders will have to pay. The argument follows the age-old custom of India—making comparisons by using the ratio of annas to the rupee. An eight anna crop would be half the best out-turn that could be expected in a normal year—and what farmer would admit to raising a rupee crop?

The argument around the mound grows hot. The farmers assert that the village grew a better crop last

year and it was only reckoned at eleven annas. The old fellow grows sillier as time passes, they think. Finally, it is settled: twelve annas. Passing through the many stages of the Revenue Department, the old chowkidar's guess at how much grain his village has raised at last reaches the provincial secretariat, along with thousands of similar estimates.

Months later, a very high member of the provincial administration sits in august conference in Delhi. "Our crop forecast shows that we can only expect 21½ lakh tons of rice this year," he tells his fellow representatives. In turn they peer at the neatly typed lines of figures lying before them—the essence derived from the distillation of thousands of other village chowkidars' guesses.

An eastern province submits an extremely low forecast. His western neighbour sighs and wonders vaguely how the people in that eastern area feed themselves. Another neatly typewritten list in his folder shows that his province's imports from the eastern neighbour are nearly half the figure which its representative has just mentioned.

Of course there may be explanations: imports from somewhere else; a cautious official may have tried to offset his chowkidars' enthusiasm for "Grow More Food" drive results, or produce from neighbouring state territory may not have been accounted for. As the morning wears on the conference sinks into a morass of figures—figures supposed to indicate the food the country has grown for the people to eat, but which, it is tragically clear, is not available. What is the good of promising a colleague a lakh of tons of rice if it exists only in the imaginations of several hundred chowkidars?

This puzzle has faced India ever since the problem of how to feed the people arose. How to discover how much food is really available? A variety of causes—greater consumption in the villages, withholding for higher prices by the growers, or hoarding by the traders—can confuse the issue. But even if they all

behaved perfectly normally it would be no simple task.

For example, province A grows rice and millet during the monsoon, with wheat and pulses for winter crops. How much food is available for the people of province A in a year? Where is the year to begin—calendar year, financial year or crop year? Will the crop grown in that year be consumed in the same period or will part of it be carried over to the following year? How much was in hand from the previous year?

Even if you can work out all those problems accurately for province A, what about province B which harvests three rice crops in twelve months, or province C which depends mainly on a wheat crop ready in April? Actually, the calculations for the the individual province can be fairly easily made if you select a cycle of twelve months to suit a particular crop. But when there are many crops, many provinces, a variety of seasons and the necessity of feeding the people every day, it would be hardly surprising if food administrators went grey without any assistance from hoarders and village chowkidars.

Then there is the extra fact that few areas are completely self-contained. One grain is exported and another imported. A man may make his living by growing high quality rice for sale, and buy bajri for his family's food.

How does this work out on an all-India scale? If we judge by exports and imports, we may reckon that Assam, Bengal, Bihar, Bombay and Madras, plus the states associated with them, and the N.W.F. Province, do not produce enough cereals to feed their populations. The Punjab, Sind, the United Provinces, Orissa and the Central Provinces and Berar have surpluses of food. But if we assume that this rough and ready statement is the same for every crop in every year or that the total surplus in one year is equal to the total deficit in the same year, we shall land ourselves in serious difficulties which are complicated by the fact

that India's real food needs are greater than total production, anyway.

Further headaches arise when we consider that surplus food from one area cannot always meet a deficit in another. For example, the excellent millet crops of the United Provinces do not help to replace a rice shortage in Bengal, because most Bengalis claim that a millet diet makes them ill.

Consequently, to read the record of wartime food speeches by successive Commerce, Education, Health and Lands, and Food Members of the Viceroy's Council is to realise that figures can prove anything, especially when they are approximate. As a foundation on which to build up a distribution system, India's agricultural returns are a statistical quicksand.

Such muddling came in for severe criticism from the Food Grains Policy Committee who concluded that: "The present position regarding agricultural statistics relating to production, distribution, export, consumption and stocks is most unsatisfactory. An improvement in the position is not only desirable but essential for the formulation of a successful food policy. We, therefore, recommend that the proposals for the improvement of agricultural statistics which are now before the Department of Education, Health and Lands should be implemented forthwith."

How wide of the mark Indian food budgeting can be was proved in 1943 when the provinces participating in the original basic plan failed hopelessly to provide the supplies which they estimated would be available. We have already investigated the main reason for that breakdown: village guesswork. It was probably exaggerated in 1942-43 by the "Grow More Food" operations. After that pother no village official was likely to invite critical attention from on high by reporting a smaller harvest!

There was, however, another and more complicated cause of inaccuracy. Even if the village chowkidars did guess correctly the size of the crop, they could not

forecast how much the villagers would take to market. The amount depended on the movement of the market while the grain was actually being harvested and the grower's opinion of his chances of obtaining extra supplies at reasonable prices later in the year.

Since all these forecasts were really wild guesses, there is little wonder that there was no unanimity among the guessers. Mr. N. R. Sarker told the Food Production Conference in April 1942 that the total quantity of rice, wheat, jowar, bajri and gram grown in India each year was about 60 million tons. The Food Grains Policy Committee, reporting about 18 months later, added two more grains—maize and barley—to Mr. Sarker's list and reckoned that in 1941-42 Indian production was only 51,817,000 tons. Considering what had happened in the meantime the later estimate seemed the more reasonable.

Mr. Sarker's analysis was the first detailed exposition of how the country ate. Many of the figures are now familiar, including the 1,400,000 tons of rice from Burma which represented only a little over five per cent of India's total rice production and about 2.3 per cent of the country's total food crops Arithmetically, food supplies were not in a tight corner, provided that they came to market just as easily as in the low price days before the war; that speculators did not interfere with the free flow to the consumer, and that a large proportion of the people continued to live on a deficient diet.

Though Mr. Sarker failed to realise the havoc the backlog of deficiency could wreak in an uncontrolled market, he did explain that owing to a poor rice crop in 1941-42, internal production of rice was down by 900,000 tons which meant that the total rice deficit was 2,300,000 tons. Mr. Sarker said this amount was deficit compared with normal consumption. *No one responsible for this governmental arithmetic seems to have understood that any deficit at all on average consumption meant disaster since India's normal*

consumption was already below the level necessary to maintain health.

In other words, India's belt was already pulled so tight that there was no margin for further adjustments. It was therefore immaterial whether the extra deficiency was 2.3 per cent or 23 per cent—there wou'd be disaster just the same.

The provincial estimates which Mr. Sarker provided in April 1942 make extraordinary reading to-day. Bengal, which was estimated to import about 310,000 tons of grain, was expected to have a surplus of 1,350,000 tons of rice, and would thus be able to make good the rice deficits in Bihar and Assam and still have a surplus. Even allowing for the fact that the October 1942 cyclone destroyed 1,500,000 tons of rice, it is evident that these Bengal figures are not even approximate. The province never became self-sufficient, let alone surplus The Gregory Report later showed that Bengal normally imported about a quarter of a million tons of rice a year instead of the 64,000 tons in Mr. Sarker's estimates. Curiously enough he reckoned that the United Provinces and the Central Provinces wou'd be deficit areas, while the deficits estimated for Bombay and Madras were far below those provinces' real needs.

Though Mr. Sarker gave the conference a grave warning about the possible sequel of such deficits, no one concerned in the business seems to have had a true insight into the existing state of affairs. Lacking such a picture, their attempts at planning must of necessity have been defective. As a matter of fact, at least one province made very little attempt at planning. By the end of the year, Bengal's Chief Minister claimed that his province's rice position would be satisfactory if they received wheat from outside, and added naively: "We do not want to be fixed to a policy. We shall act as we may decide." Considering the general lack of exact information about food supplies in any of the provinces, a cynic may be pardoned for concluding that the Bengal Minister's attitude was probably the

soundest one in the circumstances. Such a conclusion would of course ignore the fact that even when that Minister was assuring the Food Conference of his province's rice sufficiency, prices were rising while the Bengal harvest was in progress.

After the first Food Conference, the Government of India produced their first basic plan to enable deficiencies to be met by surpluses. Provincial administrations were to bring maximum stocks of food grains under governmental control and to keep Delhi informed of their stock position. If this plan had any merit at all it was to show the world what was lacking. Only three out of 52 returns were submitted to Delhi. The provinces either could not or would not reveal their position.

The target figures set for procurement of food grains were admitted to be conjectural; they turned out to be the wildest fiction. The surplus provinces were expected to produce 1,450,000 tons of food grains in April, May and June They actually made available 570,000 tons. From one province which had agreed to supply more than 46,000 tons of rice, 24,000 tons of jowar and nearly 29,000 tons of gram from April to June, only 25,000 tons of rice could be obtained. Another province which declared a surplus of 200,000 tons of millets, 100,000 tons of wheat and 125,000 tons of gram, could only produce 20,000 tons of millets and 1,000 tons of gram. In fact, all told only about one-third of what was promised was produced.

I have spent a good deal of time trying to find out how such fantastic results were produced. Every conceivable excuse has been put forward. Surplus provinces have blamed the transport authorities and the buyers who, it is alleged, could not make up their minds to shift the stuff. Deficit provinces have also blamed the traders who are said to have delayed dispatches or made sales to speculators because they were tempted by the rising market. May be some of those explanations are correct. But responsible officials have also agreed that the village chowkidar was

the real villain of the piece; the makers of the basic plan simply did not know what food would be available in their respective areas.

The alternative to such extraordinary goings on was to drop the basic plan and permit free trade. But too many people were too near starvation to permit of drastic experiments. As we have seen, free trade was given up and a revised basic plan adopted. At the time of writing, this system is still operating with Delhi taking a more and more positive part, as advised by the Food Grains Policy Committee.

This Committee which commenced operations in July and signed its report in September, produced a series of recommendations which left no more loopholes for ingenious explanations of failure.

Five groups of remedial measures were proposed:—

(1) An increase in available supplies, both home-grown and imported.

(2) Improvement in the procurement of home-grown supplies.

(3) Measures to secure more equitable distribution, e.g. rationing.

(4) A check on rising food prices by a general extension of statutory price control.

(5) A general overhaul of the administrative machinery and a readjustment of relations between the provinces and the centre.

Under the heading of increasing supplies, the Committee recommended that India cease to be a net exporting country and become a net importer, with imports of 1,500,000 tons in the first year and 1,000,000 tons in succeeding years. The extra half million tons was intended to create a central food grains reserve, in order to assist price control and procurement.

Regarding procurement of Indian-grown supplies of food the Committee rejected both free trade and the establishment of a Central Government food grains monopoly, the latter on the score of urgency since

time would be needed to build up such a vast machine. Thus the work was to be left to the provinces as far as possible and even they were not to use compulsion except as a last resort. It was considered better to induce the cultivator to bring his produce to market by offering him better supplies of the goods he required or if these could not be adequately increased to sell him precious metals.

Distribution was to be controlled, at any rate in part, by rationing forthwith all towns with a population of 1,00,000 and over, at the rate of a pound of cereals a head a day. As far as possible, the retail trade was to be used, subject of course to drastic enforcement of the law. Rural rationing was recognised to be impossible, except that in famine and semi-famine areas distribution "cannot be left to the normal channels of trade and Government action is absolutely imperative."

The Committee was not completely unanimous over statutory price control though the majority supported the policy and the report recommended central control over statutory prices, with regional prices achieved through co-operation by the provinces and States of a particular region, as the aim.

The vexed question of who should administer the control machinery was settled by the Committee which reported that "since the public will not tolerate a 'hands off' attitude by the Centre, the Centre cannot accept any situation which would involve its having to carry great responsibilities without having adequate power." The report required the Centre to have "the last word" regarding price changes, allocations of supplies, management of the Central food grains reserve, any conditions laid down for rescue or special assistance operations, and details of administration.

When the report was published the programme for imports—1,500,000 tons of food grains in the first year and 1,000,000 tons thereafter—startled the country. Few observers had believed that anyone would recommend relief on such a scale. The Committee merely

pointed out that a million tons had been the average annual net imports for the last five years and that in India there was very little room for tightening the belt as far as the mass of the population was concerned.. If a minimum standard of one pound of cereal per adult per day could not be guaranteed out of home supplies, "then imports *must* be arranged for."

Once they had recovered from their shock, the critics did not waste much time before demanding much greater imports—such as five million tons a year. In doing so they showed an extraordinary blindness to the economic position towards which India was heading.

Presumably the Food Grains Policy Committee, recognising past facts, made their recommendation as a wartime measure; in peacetime more attention could be devoted to increasing India's home-grown supply. The critics, on the other hand, in their haste to lay their burdens on some one else's shoulders, did not seem to realise that a million tons was only the thin end of the wedge; that if the country's population went on increasing at its present rate, the necessity for imports would soon reach several million tons a year. And where would India's favourable trade balance and her opportunities of buying machinery from the rest of the world, be then?

The Food Grains Policy Committee not only threw a searchlight on India's food peril, but revealed the brink of the economic precipice on which she was standing in spite of the war boom.

CHAPTER XI

THE CASE FOR CONTROL

"We are convinced that control of the prices of food grains is an essential factor not only in the feeding of the poor, but in the whole economic structure of the country. Rationing in urban areas, we are persuaded, is an essential factor in the general scheme."

Why in November 1943 did Sir Jwala Prasad Srivastava, the Food Member, make this extraordinary statement in the Central Legislative Assembly? Extraordinary because it was diametrically opposed to anything either the Government of India or the majority of the provinces had advocated during the previous four years.

There were three reasons for the Food Department's conversion to a policy which has long been followed by every wartime administration outside India. The first and most obvious cause was the extreme difficulty the population was experiencing in obtaining food—difficulty so serious that it amounted to famine in several parts of the country.

The second reason was that control attempts on a provincial basis had failed miserably either to hold back prices or provide adequate supplies. The interdependence of consuming and producing provinces had been proved to the hilt. India had before it scores of examples such as the following:

A local authority controlled the retail price of gram dal at a level which appeared to be generously above normal prices. At once all stocks of gram dal disappeared from the market. Reason: the dal was produced in an area under another authority's jurisdiction where the wholesale price was 50 per cent *above* the retail price fixed in the consuming area! Gram dal remained off the market till the retail price control was cancelled.

Observers of such futile attempts at control called repeatedly for integrated effort. But such a development was impossible so long as there was no general scheme into which both producers and consumers alike were fitted.

Finally, it was apparent that even if supplies at controlled prices were made available, it was almost impossible to ensure that they reached the people who most needed them. In other words, it was difficult to maintain reasonable price levels and ensure that

everyone got a share, without also introducing rationing.

These principles had of course been tested in Great Britain in 1914-18 and although the rationing system then introduced compared unfavourably with the method operating since 1939, it succeeded in distributing the available food on a reasonably equitable basis.

In the light of that experience, no one ever doubted that if Britain had to face food difficulties or war again, rationing would at once return on a really comprehensive scale. It is now a matter of history that this planning was started three years *before* war actually broke out. It is also a matter of history that the first large-scale rationing scheme in India (Bombay) was not introduced until nearly three years *after* war had started.

To anyone from the west, where wartime rationing is practically universal, there is no need to present a case for the control of food and all necessities of life. To them its necessity is self-evident.

In India, on the other hand, neither administrators nor public saw the necessity for such control, although as we now know, the equitable distribution of the country's limited food supply, even in peacetime, really demanded some form of management. Indeed, until much greater supplies are made available, the case for maintaining a distribution machine even after the war, is almost unanswerable. Whatever other aspirations India may have, the first and most important should be the proper feeding of the population. Chronic undernourishment of more than 30 per cent of the people, while a small fraction lives lavishly, does not represent a progressive state of affairs.

The main arguments against detailed control in India were of course the policy of not interfering with provincial autonomy, the public's alleged lack of confidence in controls, the antiquated doctrine that everything is bound to go wrong if the law of supply and demand is not obeyed, the alleged difficulties of

operating controls in a country as big and as backward as India. When these arguments are seen against a background of public failure to realise that a coolie is as much entitled to a ration as a millionaire, they appear to assume cogency.

We have already examined the policy of maintaining provincial autonomy at all costs. The argument against it was well summed up by *The Economist* of London late in 1943 when that paper wrote: "A Government which can imprison and punish as this one has done, necessarily, to preserve order, cannot in honesty refuse firm action to prevent famine." In the early weeks of his regime Lord Wavell proved that such firm action was possible.

The argument about lack of public confidence was chiefly used by non-official critics of control. It was true that owing to the piecemeal nature of the early attempts at control—and their failure—faith in the capacity of officials to enforce food measures was severely shaken. The critics who used this argument professed to believe that if rationing broke down the people would starve. They said that unless Government could guarantee rations there would be riots and the whole system of control would collapse.

I am afraid that a good deal of the fervour behind this line of talk arose from the strong desire of certain sections of the public to remain free to acquire as much food as they wished. They saw nothing wrong if the poor starved while the rich protected themselves against the future with ramparts of rice bags. The whole controversy was of course rendered futile by the undoubted fact that without general control the poor people were rapidly nearing starvation. The question was not one of whether general confidence could be established but of whether general famine could be averted. In such a context Government guarantees meant nothing; either the people starved or they didn't.

Fragmentary economics appear to exercise an almost hypnotic effect in India. At any rate, that is the only

way I can explain the parrot-like reiteration by all sections of the community of the maxim that "the law of supply and demand must be obeyed." It was used either to explain the failure of a Government control measure or to tack on to a demand that Government take firm action It even appeared to explain a situation when it was admitted that the whole trouble was due to speculators' manipulations.

It was of course the old story of a little knowledge being a dangerous thing. The supply and demand advocates either wilfully or otherwise neglected to notice that in wartime defence needs might tie up supplies or make demands which could unbalance the whole economic structure. In any case, who tampered with the supposed balance of these forces more than the speculators? Why this "law" should have to operate in India when it had been suspended in all the other belligerent countries no one ever explained.

As for the difficulties of operation, they were admittedly great; though not as great as both officials and non-officials were tempted to allege. Here the case for control was up against very powerful forces indeed. The greatest of them all was undoubtedly inertia, both official and public. Neither side really wanted to tackle control and in Indian conditions it was easy to find excuses. There was no precedent for control; the people were illiterate; the risks of corruption too great; the problem of obtaining and transporting the necessary supplies too overwhelming.

By degrees it became apparent that most of these difficulties stood in the way of people eating, control or no control. First Bombay and then Madras, among the big cities, were forced to ration supplies. Then it was discovered that on the whole neither illiteracy nor lack of public confidence, nor risk of corruption were such serious factors as the failure to provide adequate transport for food and the absence of any general price and procurement plan.

All these factors represented jobs not for the public or the local officials, but for the central bureaucracy

which still could not comprehend that the people's food should rate as high a priority as war materials. Even at the end of the 1943 food ranked third on the list of priorities for railways serving Bombay where the populace depended entirely on officially procured —and transported—supplies. In the West food has long been regarded as an equal to "munitions of war."

Delay in introducing control produced troubles of its own. By 1943 speculators and hoarders had such a hold on the food markets that deflationary measures were necessary to make them loosen their grip. Though these measures were primarily introduced to restore general commercial sanity, I am doubtful whether the later food controls could have made much progress without them.

Uncontrolled consumption was another factor which grew steadily as time went on. With a population as large and underfed as India's, the effects of the people eating an extra ounce a day are apt to be startling—about four million tons a year. Since the total supply is deficient and not surplus to the people's real needs, expanding consumption must cause disaster. It has been claimed that the rapid rise in prices has prevented an increase in individual consumption. On the other hand, we know that in certain parts of the country, such as the Punjab, a considerable share of the extra price has reached the grower, thus relieving him of the need to sell so large a proportion of his crop. In the cities generous dearness allowances have been paid. Further proof is provided by the failure of crops to come to market in certain areas.

The question of how much food has been withheld by growers or hoarded by middlemen and consumers has aroused keen controversy. Since the key to all this business is secrecy, it is difficult to get an answer.

Take the grower's case first. The food marketed in India consists of the small surpluses—often a few maunds at a time—from millions of small farmers. Normally most of them have to sell as soon as the harvest is ripe. If, however, they get a slightly better

price and if such goods as cloth, sugar and hurricane lanterns cost more than they can afford, they will only sell sufficient produce to meet their immediate cash needs. If they think, as many growers thought in 1942-43, that grain prices would rise still further they will wait as long as possible before selling. It has become apparent that while an improved price will stimulate production, a *rising* price will keep produce off the market.

Such conditions play straight into the hands of the the middleman Financially stronger than the grower, he can keep supplies out of circulation almost indefinitely. Judging by the quantities which have been discovered, either by raids or accident, trade hoards reached immense proportions. Here are a few examples: The floods at Upleta in Kathiawar in the 1943 monsoon destroyed lakhs of rupees worth of illicitly stored grain. In the Bijapur famine area of Bombay a cultivator broke the newly constructed bund around his field after a heavy downpour. The officials responsible for the bund discovered that a large quantity of grain had been buried in the field. If that could happen on one man's land it could undoubtedly happen elsewhere.

In the worst famine areas of Bengal rice was never completely unobtainable. Lucky raids produced quantities like 6,000 and 10,000 maunds at a haul, but there were undoubtedly very large stocks split into small stores "underground".

In the Punjab, where food was never scarce, vast quantities were stored. Everyone who could borrow a little money did so and bought grain. They did not fear that there would be no supplies, but they were frightened of being starved by rising prices. Such people did not intend to speculate, nor did they understand that high prices must have a limit somewhere. So long as the cost kept mounting they felt impelled to buy in order to avoid having to pay still higher rates—which they might not be able to afford—later on. Between them hundreds of thousands of small

hoards were built up. In other areas loan societies assisted their members to buy stocks of food, the excuse being that it was customary for middle class households to keep a year's stock on hand. This unfortunate use of funds was particularly noticeable in Gujerat. Thus, although the whole of India's food supply was required for immediate use in the kitchen, a large proportion of it was being diverted into the storeroom. The case for controlling consumers' buying was established.

The obvious thing to do was to put controls into force to make people with food to sell take it to market, while on the other hand discouraging those who had enough to eat from buying more. Apart from the question of whether Delhi or the provinces should promulgate and work these controls, there was the problem of method. One could establish a fair range of prices all the way from producer to consumer and attempt to *force* everyone to obey the law. With 388 *million* people, ninety per cent of whom lived in the villages and to a greater or lesser extent grew their own food, compulsion would not be as easy as it might sound. It was necessary not only to control the price, but to insist that surpluses were brought out; that the food actually reached the consumers' markets and that it was fairly shared out when it arrived there.

The alternative to putting every village under virtual martial law was to *induce* the people to follow a definite plan. This was preferable from every point of view—if it would work. It depended of course on restoring public confidence. The task was threefold: to reassure the producer that he would receive a fair price for his grain and that no further price rises would be allowed; to convince the consumer that both supplies and prices would be stabilised; and to convince the trade that since prices and supplies were becoming stable, no further malpractices would be either profitable or permissible.

Those are the essentials of control in India and in the early months of 1944—five and a half years after the declaration of war—there were signs that the country might at last have the benefit of them.

CHAPTER XII
RATIONING: OFFICIAL AND OTHERWISE

Indian ideas on the subject of rationing were confused, to say the least. Democratic ideals have not progressed to the point where the biological equality of all men is clearly recognised in India. Many otherwise intelligent people, who would have no difficulty in agreeing to such a principle in the abstract, are suddenly beset with doubts when asked to observe it in their daily lives. Hence the repeated demand that those who had access to additional food supplies should be allowed to use them. Obviously western style rationing schemes could not pay any regard to Indian ideas of class privilege—which was probably why the presence of British food experts in the country was so violently denounced by certain upper class Indian leaders.

Apart from ignorance and the backward state of Indian social ideas, there was the very real practical difficulty of extreme variations in living standards. The rationing planner's biggest headache was to bridge the gap between the man who in 1939 spent three or four rupees a month on his food and the man who spent Rs 50 and upwards. It was not much use to lay down quantities without ensuring that the prices at which they were available were within reach of all. A further consideration was the fact that all communities and classes did not eat the same essential foods. We have already noticed Bengal's difficulty in consuming anything but rice; sugar provided another problem. Many of India's poorer people eat little or no refined sugar, but use gur to sweeten their food. Is it possible

to draw a line through a community and say that this man shall have refined sugar and that man shall not? Or, if we agree that all must be treated alike, is it possible to obtain enough supplies to provide an adequate ration? Similarly, must the man whose staple foods are wheat bread and meat be given the same rice ration as the vegetarian?

Reverting to the problem of prices, it has to be realised that the Indian subsistence level is so low that even at pre-war prices not everyone would be able to afford an adequate ration, and that they have rarely, if ever, eaten the equivalent of an adequate ration! Is everyone, therefore, to be rationed down to the quantities these unfortunates are able to buy, or is the ration to be laid down on an adequate scale and everyone left to take up as much of his allotment as he can afford? The more fortunate members of the community would say that an adequate scale of rationing is essential. On the other hand, the rationing administrator will soon realise that the presence of too many unconsumed ration allotments in his area permits the establishment of a black market which may play havoc with public confidence in the system. Such spare rations also mean that an unnecessarily large amount of food has to be found for the area. The alternative is adequate rations at subsidised prices—a still more revolutionary step for India.

It is apparent that no Indian rationing scheme can be made completely water-tight; equitable distribution in any area must depend to some extent on the good sense of the administrator and his advisers. Local success is an undoubted tribute to the excellence of their discretion.

The food control principles which are being followed in India were clearly summed up by Mr. W. H. Kirby, Rationing Adviser to the Government of India, during a debate on food in the Central Legislative Assembly in November, 1943. He said:—

"The object of food rationing is not primarily to reduce consumption, but to distribute short supplies

in an equitable manner. When supplies are ample and assured—as in certain Provinces and States—the control of consumption is necessary for the effective mobilisation of resources for war purposes; but when supplies are short and irregular, a closely controlled rationing scheme is even more necessary to ensure a fair distribution to all.

"*Rationing and Price Control.* Food rationing must go hand in hand with price control; each helps the other. No price control can withstand, unaided, the pressure of increasing demand on dwindling supplies, and it must be accompanied by quantitative controls over demand and supply. Equally, rationing requires price control. Since no matter how widespread rationing is, it will not ensure equitable distribution among all income groups unless prices are low enough to enable every one to buy his ration.

"*Uniformity.* Food rationing schemes should, in their policy and detail, be as far as possible, uniform. Their smooth operation depends on the degree to which they are co-ordinated with related policies, more especially controls over production, supply, price and income. These cannot be operated in water-tight compartments. There is seldom any justification for local variations in rationing schemes. It is more efficient, more intelligible and less wasteful for a uniform system, prepared and supervised by experts, to be adopted throughout the country.

"*Comprehensive Rationing.* Food rationing should be comprehensive. It is seldom possible to introduce rationing for a particular commodity in short supply without extending it very soon to cover other commodities. It is necessary to plan ahead bearing in mind the probability of expansion, and the compilation of instructions, forms and ration cards should be made with this in view. It is, however, advisable to keep food rationing distinct from the rationing of other commodities.

"*Legal Sanction and Enforcement.* All rationing must have its legal sanctions, which will give the

necessary powers for enumeration, registration and control. These must be rigorously enforced, and it is advisable, as in the U. K., to employ special staff for the purpose (N. B. the number of successful prosecutions for food offences in the London Division alone exceed 600 a month, and extremely heavy terms of imprisonment and fine have been awarded.)

"*Advisory Committees.* It is necessary to associate the public and the trade with rationing administration. Local food advisory councils or food control committees should be set up, having as members representatives of the trade, transport and distribution, hotel and catering experts and welfare workers. The functions of these committees should be advisory and not executive.

"*Supply and Distribution.* The distribution of foodstuffs by rationing must be carefully co-ordinated with the supply position, and its planning supported by an accurate statistical 'balance sheet' adjusted day by day. Both in supply and distribution, wholesale and retail traders should be used, under Government licence and supervision, to carry out the operations as Government agents. But in case the method of working through trade proves to be impossible, an alternative scheme, to be operated entirely by official agency, must be ready to take its place at short notice. There is no reason why distribution through efficiently run Government grain shops as well as through licensed retailers should not continue simultaneously.

" '*Buffer' Stocks.* The strength of the supply position in relation to a rationing organisation is the maintenance of reserve stocks of the essential rationed foods. These reserves or 'buffer' stocks can be accumulated gradually and 'turned over' in order to prevent deterioration. Storage for these reserves should be divided up, and sited strategically.

"*Propaganda and Publicity.* Food is 'news'. The goodwill of the press can be of immense value in the administration of food rationing. Daily advertisements in the local newspapers are recommended, with a

distinctive layout and a constant position in the paper, containing instructions, news and advice to the public on food matters. No method of publicity should be neglected and, in addition to the press, cinemas and wireless should be freely used.

"*Surplus Versus Deficit.* When a country is in the midst of a serious crisis, as India is now in relation to food, it is illogical that—through no fault of their own—the population of certain Provinces and States are at starvation level, whilst others are surrounded by ample food.

"*Anti-Social.* Besides being illogical, such a state is anti-social, non-ethical and a possible breeding ground of civil discontent.

"*Statistical Accuracy.* The inauguration of a rationing scheme enables the authority to calculate with mathematical accuracy the exact requirements of the staple foods for the population, and is in a position to give a true statistical statement that will show how much surplus foodgrains can be released for the deficit areas.

"*Urban and Industrial Areas.* Since the population of all large cities—especially those situated on the coastline—are unable to grow food, but are usually occupied in manufacturing the material needs of the country-side, each set of the community is helpless without the aid of the other.

"*Creation of Employment.* To the objection raised by some authorities in connection with the inauguration of a complicated piece of administrative machine and the necessity to engage a large staff, the answer is, the more employment that can be given to a country's citizens the better for everyone concerned, provided, of course, that elementary economics are observed.

"*Goodwill and Confidence.* Since food rationing instils confidence into the people, an authority is the sole judge of the amount it is prepared to pay for securing such confidence, and an efficient food control scheme. The cost to Bombay works out at one rupee

per person, per year—a fact that is continually being overlooked by the critics of the most efficient Bombay scheme.

"*Training Scheme for Staff.* Provided the authority has the requisite skilled staff and the right outlook, no difficulties should be encountered in devising an efficient rationing scheme to meet the extent of the particular problem. Several authorities have a training scheme for their clerks.

"*Security and Confidence* When an efficient food control scheme is in operation, it is not only the population which feels a sense of security and confidence, but the authority itself, because it is the possessor of an 'instrument' that can be made to cover several other forms of 'consumer' goods control, other than food, provided the 'food' side is kept separate.

"Briefly, it can be said that rationing provides.—

A yardstick for measuring consumption
Reduces consumption—when necessary
Ensures equitable distribution
Prevents a 'run' on a commodity in short supply
Prevents hoarding
Prevents profiteering—prevents queueing
Releases surplus quantities for deficit areas
Enables an authority to build up reserves on a mathematically correct basis
Controls prices
Raises efficiency of administration
Restores confidence in the people
Allays suspicions of the hardly pressed cities that their more fortunate brethren are not exploiting a national calamity.

"The inauguration of food control and food rationing in time of war, might conceivably mark the beginning of a new era of nutritional feeding, equitable distribution and a more satisfactory price structure for everyone concerned in the days of peace."

When Mr. Kirby made this speech, Bombay, the first big town to be rationed, had completed six

months of such operations. The period of food queues was forgotten and no one was dying of starvation in the city. Although Bombay was the first big rationing centre, certain smaller areas had been operating rudimentary rationing and even a price equalisation scheme from a comparatively early period. One such area which I investigated was Amreli in Kathiawar, where food control had been operating since 1941. Amreli is a small area of Baroda State territory set amid a variety of other state territories, the quality of whose administration varied widely and few of whom understood the value of co-operation. When I visited Amreli some two years after the initiation of their control scheme, kerosene and sugar were rationed and could only be bought on production of a card—one for each commodity—on which the purchase was recorded. Cereals were not rationed but could only be bought in limited quantities at a time. The local shopkeepers had to maintain detailed records of all sales and the prices of kerosene, petrol, crude oil, sugar, rice, wheat, bajri, jowar and pulses were controlled.

Records showed that the citizens were not taking up all their quota in every case. Since there were no cases of malnutrition visible, the inference was that the quantities were generous. There were no queues; articles did not suddenly disappear from the market, and a consumer could buy his whole month's supply at a time if he wished. If he found himself in exceptional circumstances such as a wedding, he could make an application for an extra allowance, but such applications were not encouraged.

Distribution was undertaken "through the normal trade channels", that is to say, the shopkeepers were able to serve their regular customers and were allowed their normal percentage of profit. As the population had grown somewhat (refugees etc.) and rationing was not severe, their turnover and profits were at least as good as normal. Since wholesale prices were controlled, they could not complain of being squeezed.

They had some additional work in keeping registers of customers and they could only draw stocks of controlled goods against records of sales. All registers, ration cards etc. were liable to audit. Some shopkeepers had not been able to resist the temptation to profiteer but care was taken to see that any illicit profit was more than accounted for in the fines they were made to pay. Only one shop in the town was not in private hands, and the volume of its sales acted as a barometer of the shopkeepers' behaviour. A sudden increase in demand at the standard shop was a signal for investigation.

As for the wholesalers who were responsible for procuring supplies, they operated on fixed profit margins, stocks had to be declared fortnightly and an order from the rationing authority was essential before a retailer's indent could be filled. Scarce commodities such as kerosene could not disappear because they could neither enter or leave the territory without permission. Considerable energy was shown in catching law breakers under rules which made possible the infliction of such punishments as confiscation of goods, fines or jail—nor did these rules remain a dead letter.

The most serious objection to the scheme appeared to be that prices outside the area were considerably higher than those fixed within, thus making difficult the maintenance of supplies at reasonable prices. Smuggling by neighbours and unwillingness of traders to comply with the rules were grave potential headaches for the administrator.

Certain goods, it was true, were being distributed at less than cost price, but neither the state nor the people were losing thereby. A simple form of price equalisation was used. Most of Amreli district's food was raised within its own borders, with a surplus of certain items. For example, there was a bumper crop of bajri in 1942-43. For it the cultivator had to be paid a minimum price which at the time of harvest was higher than that in neighbouring areas. Any at-

tempt to hammer down this price was met by a counter-offer from the price control authority who, supported by the local agricultural banks, would always pay cash for any quantity at the fixed price.

Once the harvest was over, outside prices began to rise and the Amreli controller was willing to sell his surplus at a price between his own control and the open market rate in the buying area. Such a system caused protest since less provident neighbours wished to take advantage of Amreli's forethought and buy at the Amreli control price to save themselves from the consequences of their own lax methods. The Amreli controller's answer was that the middle price was saving them money anyway and enabling the selling area to maintain low price levels for those commodities for which they had to pay heavily outside—again thanks to someone else's lax administration.

No one claimed that this system was entirely watertight, but it was extraordinarily successful because of the cordial co-operation between leaders of the public, the traders and the control authorities. Instead of spending their time finding loopholes in the rules they concentrated on supervising their observance.

At the centre of administration was a committee consisting of the district magistrate, his assistant, three representatives of the district town and one from each taluqa—a total of eleven. They included the Nagarseth—the hereditary head of the town—and the president of the municipality. The committee's secretary was the municipal vice-president. All of them were men of considerable substance and prestige and most of them stood to lose personally by imposing control, since Amreli was an important grain centre for southern Kathiawar.

The stimulus came from the district magistrate, an Indian graduate of the London School of Economics, by virtue of his knowledge of the district's supply position (he early enforced the making of stock returns), and his power to enforce regulations. In practice, having given the scheme legal standing he

could leave much of the work to his permanent committee. The success of their operations undoubtedly depended to a large extent on the enthusiasm which he had been able to impart. He had apparently appealed to them on a variety of grounds: the opportunities for philanthropy (they were wealthy men), the importance of avoiding discontent and looting in their home town (which was full of grain warehouses), the fact that this was an emergency and not a permanent state of affairs.

Having established an atmosphere which had more than a slight flavour of the early Crusades, he left them to get on with the work. They knew collectively as well as he did the problems facing town and district. If they could produce solutions to which he could give legal standing, the job would be very nearly done.

Higher authority in Baroda State, somewhat surprised at Amreli district's progress, had the commonsense to delegate the necessary powers to the district magistrate and to advise him in such a manner that once a scheme had been worked out its operation could not be obstructed by some litigious busybody. The State also provided some interest-free capital. This method has proved eminently successful, clear of corruption and expense.

There have been difficult moments, of course, such as divergences of opinion between the magistrate and his committee. Fortunately he had the good sense not to fling them aside as soon as they crossed his path. Instead, he handed over to them the work of administering their own schemes. The effect was to generate a considerable amount of enthusiasm which showed itself in a variety of ways. As the central distributing body, the committee first needed money and the members produced their own fund. When rationing was introduced, volunteers came forward to pay the printing bills and the vast amount of clerical work was done voluntarily, with the committee men in the lead. The more they did the more they liked it.

Similarly non-official committees were given the job of fixing prices There was a separate committee for each commodity and the personnel of each committee consisted of two producers, two middlemen and two consumers.

The district town organisation was used as the basis of control in the surrounding taluqas. Each taluqa had a committee to supervise control in the villages but without any responsibility for finance, all of which was handled at the district headquarters. Village shopkeepers drew their supplies twice a month at the same headquarters against sales recorded in their registers. The villagers were rationed in the same way as the townspeople, with the difference that, instead of cards, the shopkeeper's register, supervised by the village panchayat, was considered sufficient. Where a co-operative society had made headway it was used as the ration distributor, or the panchayat itself might handle rationed goods.

There was, of course, another side to the picture. Supplies had to be kept up. When high prices ruled in neighbouring areas the grower was strongly tempted to sell his produce across the border. The control committee knew that they could not stop that happening. But they found an effective remedy by refusing to supply rationed goods to a man who did not co-operate.

I make no apology for dealing with the Amreli experiment at some length. Not only was it a pioneer among small towns, but it also demonstrated how urban and rural rationing could be worked together. Later, the great cities of India came into the picture with spectacular results such as the feeding of two or three million people. Unfortunately the urban schemes, vast though they are, can only account for about ten per cent of India's total population—hardly an effective proportion when the country's aggregate supply of food is below the people's real needs.

On the other hand, could each district or taluqa town be used as the nucleus of a local control scheme,

the equitable apportionment of food to practically everyone in the country would become a practical proposition.

Would the Amreli system prove suitable elsewhere —just as Bombay's methods are the prototype for the cities? The answer is most emphatically yes, if local officials and local notables will agree to work together. The district magistrate of Amreli who developed the scheme was an uncommonly good administrator. As in so many other aspects of Indian life, the personality of the man made a great deal of difference. I do not say that every other district magistrate would be equally successful, but such methods are worthy of close attention.

Now we must turn to the cities. At the moment of writing nearly all the great population centres of India have rationing schemes—Bombay, Madras, Karachi, Calcutta—with the rest to follow. In the pioneer provinces of Bombay and Madras, nearly all the larger towns have followed the example of their provincial capitals.

Bombay led the way by introducing the rationing of cereals in May 1943. This step followed months of recurrent crises in the city's food supply and was the culmination of a series of measures intended to secure control of prices and supplies.

We have already referred to the chain of official grainshops which were opened in the city to counteract profiteering. These shops became increasingly popular and whenever there were rumours of an impending shortage huge queues formed outside them, in a desperate effort to buy up still more grain. Attempts were made to control the outflow of food by limiting purchases of grain to each buyer on any particular day. This rough and ready rationing only increased pressure on the shops and soon it became apparent that the black market was also using them as supply bases and paying people to stand in the queues. Complaints were soon common that bona fide consumers and particularly working people, who could not afford to

spend all day and every day in the queues, could get no food except by buying in the black market.

The textile mills and some of the other large employers of labour already had their own food shops to supply their workers, and to relieve pressure on the government grain shops the authorities encouraged the opening of factory and office shops wherever possible. After several weeks of preparation during which ration cards had to be issued to 18 lakhs of people, the scheme was put into force on Sunday, May 2, 1943. The foods brought under control were the cereals—wheat, rice, jowar and bajri and their products. Each adult was entitled to buy one payli (6½ lb) of cereals a week, with a half ration for children aged two to twelve. Men doing heavy manual labour were allowed an extra half payli a week. Consumption of the various grains was controlled by laying down the proportions in which each could be bought. For example, a consumer could take up to half his ration in wheat, up to three-quarters in rice or the whole ration in bajri. At the time rationing began jowar was not available. Part or all the wheat ration could be exchanged for bread or flour.

Under this preliminary scheme family ration cards were distributed. Holders had to register them with the grain shops of which there were more than a thousand, made up of 170 Government shops which could take 600 cards each; 500 authorised ration shops, run by private grain dealers, taking up to 500 cards each; plus 100 co-operative and communal stores and 250 employers' shops, which handled the rations of those entitled to use them. Standard prices were enforced for all the varieties of grain made available and the scheme was buttressed by measures to enforce the use of wholemeal wheat flour; to prevent the importation of rationed articles into the city, and also to prevent the use of wheat and rice flour in cakes, pastries and other unrationed foods. Hotels and restaurants were given quotas.

The introduction of rationing revealed the amazing mass of detail involved in its smooth enforcement in a big city. Bombay had 10,000 homeless people who had to have cards, new arrivals had to have provisional cards and to cope with them rationing offices were opened in the main railway stations. Similarly, heads of families had to notify the authorities when members of the family left the city. Ward rationing committees of prominent citizens were set up to assist the authorities.

As a distributor of food the new machine worked fairly smoothly from the start. Queues disappeared overnight and the fear that a great many illiterate people would not understand what it was all about proved groundless. The system was based on drawing a weekly ration. Later, it was made possible for people to make two drawings a week if they wished. The system enabled supplies and prices of practically all staple foods to be stabilised. In addition to the controlled cereals, ration shops also stocked pulses, barley (which was not rationed), tea, sugar and soap. Later in the year when bazaar prices for vegetables got out of hand, the Government shops also stocked these.

The main grumbles arose over quality. There were loud protests about bakers' bread (which for a time appeared to contain something more than wheat); about the cheaper quality of rice—which was mainly broken grain—and about wheat. There was undoubtedly some substance in these complaints, though allegations that some rations were inedible were never substantiated. The rationing authority took special measures to clean grain before distributing it and after a time an improvement was effected. But the sudden and considerable drop in quality at the outset of rationing has remained one of the most curious phenomena of food control in India. Almost precisely the same complaints have accompanied rationing wherever it has been introduced.

Once a rationing scheme was established, the ease with which additions could be made to the list of

rationed articles became apparent. Sugar was rationed at the rate of ten ounces a head a week early in June. For a time children were only given a half ration, but a fortnight later the authorities responded to public opinion by giving all children the same quantity as adults, and by increasing the ration to twelve ounces a week in July. Raw sugar such as gur and jaggery was not rationed.

Bombay was soon to prove, however, that even a satisfactory distribution scheme is only one of the features of good food control. Seven weeks after the scheme began the proportion of rice the public could buy in its ration was reduced from 75 per cent. to 50 per cent. and the price was increased. This step was necessitated by the difficulty of obtaining satisfactory low grade rice. To overcome it the Bombay authorities reclassified their higher grade rice and had to adjust prices. Later a reduction in rate became possible, thanks to the unremitting efforts of the local authorities to persuade other provinces to sell them grain at reasonable prices.

Wheat was temporarily affected early in 1944 when it became necessary to mix a proportion of barley with it. This was imported grain which Delhi had had to take during the general scramble to provide India with imported food.

These experiences probably had less effect on public confidence in rationing than most of its critics alleged, but they did underscore very heavily the vital necessity of bringing arrangements to procure grain up to the same level of efficiency. Some progress has since been made in this direction but the task is not yet complete.

To return to Bombay's story; early in July 1943 the suburbs of Bombay City and also the town of Poona were rationed. The job reached its logical conclusion late in the year when even the jungle villages on Salsette—which seem almost cut off from civilisation—were brought under similar arrangements. By the end of July it was reckoned that two million people in

Bombay City and 250,000 in the suburbs were being supplied.

No serious incidents marked the progress of this experiment. On the other hand, the public seemed to welcome it with a sigh of relief, queues were forgotten and Bombay ceased to be a bottomless pit into which endless supplies of food were poured without having much effect on the situation.

In the meantime Delhi had made up its mind that rationing must be encouraged and towards the end of the monsoon a series of courses on the theory and practice of the business were arranged in Bombay and attended by leading officials from all over the country. At that time it was reckoned that a rationing scheme needed two months to initiate in any Indian city, providing supplies could be obtained.

While the officials went home to digest their lectures, Bombay introduced a much-needed refinement—individual rationing cards. Distribution of these cards represented a major problem to prevent each person acquiring more than one card. It had already become apparent that under the family card scheme too many units had been authorised. A big preliminary drive to make family card holders revise their declarations of households had an excellent effect and a large number of surplus units were surrendered. The Bombay authorities had been wise. At first, when everyone was nervous about the experiment, the food controllers had preferred to err on the side of liberality rather than risk leaving people without food. Once confidence had been established it was comparatively easy to recall the surplus, especially when this drive was followed up by house-to-house inspections made while delivering the new personal cards. Other Bombay measures to limit food consumption include austerity meals of only three courses, a ban on feeding parties of 50 or over and a ban on the use of milk or cream for ice cream etc.

Madras was the second large city to introduce rationing which came into force there on September 5, 1943.

Broadly speaking the principles are the same as those in vogue in Bombay except that more rice per head is allowed; reckoning is based on a daily instead of a weekly unit and small supplementary rations are issued for marriages, and other religious ceremonies. Bombay allows no extra rations except for heavy manual labour, while the grain ration of a payli a week works out at a little less than a pound a day compared with the 2½ ollocks allowed daily to each adult in Madras. At the time of writing Madras still used family ration cards.

Karachi, the capital of a surplus province, introduced rationing in February 1944. Here again the individual ration is slightly larger than in Bombay and is defended on the ground that Sindhis normally eat more, anyhow.

Calcutta, although in the midst of a famine area, could not make up its mind about rationing, until the Bengal Government was instructed by Delhi to start operations by the end of January 1944. Delhi was in a position to lay down the law in this manner because it had been arranged that Calcutta's needs should be met from outside Bengal. In spite of the experiences which the province had suffered, the Civil Supplies Minister felt called upon to explain that no provision had been made for *bhog* (offerings to the gods) in the rationing scheme. He excused this omission on the ground that no other Indian control scheme had made such arrangements.

Both this " explanation " and the tussle over the Bengal Government's desire to supply Calcutta citizens only through officially run shops and eliminate as far as possible retail traders without a trial, offer interesting sidelights on the peculiar difficulties to be faced by advocates of rationing in India.

The goal of rationing every urban area is by no means as distant as it once seemed. In March 1944 Mr. Kirby was able to announce that 130 towns and over 25 million people had been rationed. He expected that figure to be doubled in a year's time.

PART THREE: THE VERY QUEER CASE OF BENGAL

CHAPTER XIII
GENESIS OF A FAMINE

In July 1943, India—and a little later the world—began to realise that the food shortage, which had threatened Western India in the previous year, had moved across country and established itself in acute form in Bengal, one of the most fertile provinces. For the next five months the dangerous problems facing the rest of the country paled into insignificance beside this tragedy of people hungering and dying at the rate of tens of thousands a week. Famine of a type almost unknown in India for more than 40 years, was rampant again. Worse still, the provincial authorities did not have the resources to declare their territory a famine area and provide relief under the Famine Code.

To any student of India's food problem Bengal provided a terrible example of what could happen when a deficient food supply was dislocated. The same development was possible in half the provinces of India. Why had fate chosen Bengal as the grisly example? Why did efforts to pour huge quantities of food into the province fail to produce much effect until nearly the end of the year? Why had the local authorities failed to keep the situation under control?

In an attempt to find an answer to these questions the Editor of *The Times of India* sent me to Bengal at the end of October 1943. The new Viceroy, Lord

Wavell, had just visited the province and it seemed possible that during my trip I might see the turning point in the famine and gain some idea of what the after-effects would be. For months we had received the impression that the famine was mainly on the sidewalks of Calcutta where destitutes from the neighbouring rural areas famished and died. After Pandit H. N. Kunzru discovered the horrible conditions of Contai (Midnapore sub-division), few doubted that Calcutta was only a symptom of the whole of Bengal. I therefore made it my business to go as far into the country as time permitted, and travelled eastward through Goalanda, Chandpur, Narayanganj and Dacca. I was also able to gather non-official first-hand reports of conditions in such areas as Barisal, Munshiganj and Mymensingh. Altogether they provided a clear picture of what had occurred.

First of all the main outline: Bengal's population is some 60 million, living in about a lakh of villages and a score of towns of which only Calcutta and Dacca are of considerable size. Such absence of urbanisation inevitably complicated relief work. Owing to the very high fertility of much of the land Bengal possesses some of the most densely settled rural areas in the world. For example, in 1941 there were 1,024 people to the square mile in Faridpur and 1,525 to the square mile in Tippera. Moreover the population of the province is increasing at the rate of more than a million a year and, in terms of cereal rations at a pound a head a day, needs nearly an extra 170,000 tons of food grain every twelve-month.

The composition of such a population is highly complicated, but for famine purposes we are most interested in the people who, being landless, cannot grow their own food. Of these there are roughly four classes: The beggars (who are always plentiful in fertile districts), the landless labourers (of whom one group, the Namasudras, alone numbers more than three million), servants, boatmen, small artisans and the lower middle classes who live on fixed salaries. In

addition, there is a very large number of families whose land is not sufficient to provide food for the whole year and who depend on earned income for the balance.

This population structure was based on rice costing from Rs. 2-8 to Rs. 5 a maund, a labourer's wage being four to five annas a day. Contrast these conditions with the official price (during late 1943) of Rs. 22 a maund and open market rates varying from Rs. 35 to Rs. 105. An important factor is the almost complete dependence of Bengal on rice as a cereal. Some wheat is eaten and during the rice shortage consumption increased, but jowar and bajri, mainstays of many a poor man in the rest of India, make the Bengali ill. Possibly he could become accustomed to them, but during an emergency, the amount of ill-health millets caused made them almost more trouble than they were worth.

Late in 1943 great publicity was given to Bengal's new *aman* (winter) rice crop—the finest for half a century—which was expected to yield 10 million tons, compared with the normal nine million tons. This, however, did not mean that the millennium was at hand. Even with normal crops, Bengal is only 83 per cent self-supporting for food, the balance being made up in pre-war years by imports of rice from Burma. Much has been made of the deprivation of this latter rice supply, but it is only one of many factors, each of which might have been overcome had a well-considered plan been executed in time.

Much more important from the point of view of Bengal's economic balance is the seasonal rise and fall of internal supplies. The main rice crop is harvested from November to January and of it only about 30 per cent ever leaves the villages. The fact that there has never been any vast movement of grain across the country explains, in part, the peculiar difficulties facing distributors of imported food in rural areas. *Aman* rice normally last the Bengal villager until about June, after which a small summer crop helps to maintain

supplies until the *aus* rice is ready in September. *Aus* grain is practically all consumed in the villages and its total quantity is less than half the *aman* crop. *Aus is important because every year the villages are short of food at the end of the monsoon.*

With such a deficit economy and a steadily increasing number of mouths to feed, Bengal, though so fertile, is never very far from famine. Observers of this ill-balanced state of affairs believe that even if war had not come, regular seasonal famines must have appeared within a few years in parts of the province. The impact of war, however, shook this rickety structure to its foundations. The great stream of refugees from Burma, the rapid growth of industries whose workers produce no food, the denial policy which disrupted transport and stocks in east Bengal, and a series of natural disasters in 1942-43 such as the tidal wave in east Bengal, the Midnapur cyclone and the Damodar floods were quite sufficient to cause serious dislocation. But undoubtedly the greatest causes of all were the wave of unbridled speculation and the woeful failure of the provincial governmental machine to enforce any form of control, thus causing everyone from the richest zamindar to the meanest beggar to lose every shred of confidence. Never in the most hectic days of Bombay's food difficulties, did the city ever know the pessimism which pervaded Bengal for months.

The first and most striking impression gained by the visitor to almost any town or village in Bengal was that only a section of the population had been visibly affected by the famine. Moreover, there was a very wide difference between the sufferers and the general public. The middle-class Bengali still possessed his well-known rotundity, but on the streets of every village and town were men, women and children—particularly women and children—who were little else than skin-covered skeletons. The first time you came across a group of them the shock was profound. As time went on, you found they formed a regular feature of the landscape. If you went to the places where they

congregated—the hospitals, soup kitchens and rest camps—you saw them by the hundred—not only in Calcutta but in every settlement above the size of a hamlet.

How many victims did this famine claim? We shall never know. Judging by the rest of the people, the proportion of destitutes to the total population was small. The highest estimate I heard was ten per cent—which meant six million—and it was quite possible that this number had been affected to a greater or lesser extent. The difficulty in making calculations of this nature is that degrees of hardship shade into each other imperceptibly, from the small businessman who had to discontinue an insurance policy in order to make more money available for food, to the labourer's deserted wife found starved to death in the corner of a field.

Even mortality figures were difficult to procure. In only two or three large centres like Calcutta and Dacca can statistics be compiled, and judging by the reports I received in smaller places, city deaths represented only a small fraction of the whole. The Government estimate that 1,000—2,000 people were dying each week in the province was clearly inaccurate when corpse disposal in Calcutta alone was 100 a day. On the known Calcutta figures an estimate of 10,000 deaths a week or 50,000 for the two months August to October seems too moderate (mortality was much heavier in October and November). Of the destitutes admitted to hospital an average of one in four died. During the cold weather of 1943 the famine was followed by a wave of disease which added considerably to the death roll. In March 1944 Mr. Amery gave the famine death roll as 689,000 during 1943.

Rural deaths were extremely difficult to gauge. Returns are made by the village chowkidars and are inaccurate, to say the least. Large numbers of people were missing. Starving parents drowned their children, husbands died on the way to Assam. Epidemics of cholera, dysentery and malaria killed off

others. Thousands died from the effects of a meal after months of semi-starvation.

While the poorest landless groups—beggars, day labourers, boatmen and village artisans—and the small cultivators were the most affected in all the famine areas, local conditions sometimes pushed the lower middle classes into the breadline. In Dacca, for example, the families of some 40 teachers, 24 pleaders, plus doctors, students and even retail shopkeers made use of the cheap food canteens which charged an anna a day for a meal. Such people were rapidly becoming destitute when food was hardly obtainable at 12 times its normal price.

It was through the organisers of free kitchens and cheap canteens in the smaller towns and villages, rather than in Calcutta, that I was able to trace the genesis of the famine. Here is what happened in Chandpur, a town of some 40,000 people in Tippera. Large numbers of destitutes congregated there and up to the end of October there were about 1,100 deaths in the hospitals and relief camps. Rice prices in the surrounding villages were ruling high late in 1942 (Rs. 7-8 instead of Rs. 5 a maund) when the harvest was still in progress.

The average cultivator did not get a high price for his rice (Rs. 7-8—Rs. 8 a maund) but the merchants undoubtedly made large sums when rates reached Rs. 45 in June 1943. Nervousness became apparent in April and May, after a rationing scheme, launched in March through the town's A.R.P. organisation, failed for want of supplies. By June destitution was so widespread that relief work to cover 20,000 people was started. Another rationing scheme was launched and 3,000 maunds of requisitioned rice was issued at the rate of 250 maunds a day. This, however, only provided the town with a half ration. Calcutta was asked to send supplies and Government replied that 55,000 maunds of food grain was coming. It never appeared.

In August the town received millets intended originally for Chittagong. It was a windfall even though

the local people found the grain difficult to digest. By the end of September, however, stocks were exhausted and there was nothing even for the relief centres. After many days of anxiety some atta arrived—enough for a quarter of a pound a head a week. Chandpur was a typical example of what can happen in an area where the majority of the population does not raise its own food. This part of Tippera district is mainly jute growing and the low price of the fibre in 1942 forced the small grower to sell his crop early for cash. When the Bengal Government finally granted a subsidy, the middleman got it.

On the whole, the public response to distress in Chandpur and many other districts was poor. There are several reasons for this—probably the main one being that otherwise charitable people could hardly afford to buy enough even for their own sustenance. The sufferers were usually the lowest class of people with whom the *Bhadralog* (middle classes) have little sympathy. Finally, there was a curious atmosphere of irresponsibility; communal and political cross-currents seriously interfered with the work. The dislocated state of the markets and the colossal fortunes piled up by unscrupulous merchants tempted even those in charge of the control price shops to dabble in the black market. On numerous occasions I was told that as much as half the supplies sent for the public found their way into the black market.

CHAPTER XIV

ON THE SPOT IN BENGAL

What is it like to endure a famine—not as an observer swiftly passing through, but as a member of the stricken community? While in east Bengal I heard many personal narratives and many a harrowing detail. Here is a very typical story, told by a resident of Barisal, one of most fertile and isolated districts of

south-east Bengal. His name was Jogesh and I met him while waiting for a paddle-wheel steamer which was thrashing its way against the strong river current to Dacca. Around us for miles stretched silky, pale green paddy fields with pretty thatched white huts under clumps of trees. It was the heaviest rice crop for fifty years, but it would not be ready for another month, when this part of Bengal would live up to its reputation as the province's granary. For the time being it was a foodless paradise.

Barisal, Jogesh told me, was just like the scene before us. It was innocent of railways, had few roads and fewer bullock carts, but since there was nearly as much water as land everyone normally travelled by boat. " The first signs of trouble came last December (1942)," said Jogesh, " when although it was the middle of the harvest, the price of rice started to rise from five rupees a maund. Soon it reached ten rupees. The denial policy, intended to prevent the Japanese infiltrating into eastern Bengal, was still operating. Boats had either been removed or their movements were limited. Large stocks of rice had also been taken away. We do not know where they went.

" Nobody blamed Government for this policy because we villagers know how easy it is for people to hide in the maze of waterways—the local thieves do it regularly, and the Japs would have copied them if they could have seized village boats. But when the authorities took away the boats our means of moving food about the area went with them. Take the case of labourers from Bikrampur (a nearby area). Every year they come down the river to help harvest Barisal's paddy. Last year they could not come because there were no boats. They did not get any food because they used to be paid in kind in Barisal and carried home several months' supply after the harvest."

Jogesh spoke without emotion. Bikrampur was only one of the many Bengal villages whose delicately balanced subsistence level livelihood was overturned by Tojo's ambitions.

"But rice buyers managed to come to Barisal, all right," Jogesh continued. "They said Government needed supplies and would confiscate our stocks if we did not hand them over. This threat was quite different from the denial policy which was only concerned with really big stocks. These later rice buyers frightened people a good deal with their talk of requisitioning and many sold rice which they really needed for their own families. I found out later that Government had never threatened to requisition and that the buyers were speculators who later sold for seventy and even a hundred rupees rice which they bought from us at ten rupees a maund.

"Rice became scarcer and scarcer—in Barisal town the shops were empty and even the little hotels couldn't feed their guests." The cold weather passed and by May rice was twelve times its normal price. "That was when we started to eat weeds," said Jogesh. "Weeds which previously we did not think were fit for cattle. We scoured the villages to try and get a little rice, but we could only buy at back doors at dead of night from a few growers who had some left. Some of us tried to eke out our food with milk but that soon rose from six pice to eight annas a seer. Later we got sweet potatoes but they quickly ran up in price from a rupee eight annas to eight rupees a maund.

"Then people began to leave the villages. When rice costs twelve times its normal price no one can afford to give alms to beggars," said Jogesh. "So they went starving to the bigger towns. Labourers who used to get four annas a day could not buy enough food, even if you gave them a rupee, so nobody could afford to pay a man to do odd jobs. They went to seek work elsewhere, leaving their wives and children to follow when news of work and food came through. But generally it did not come.

"Many of these women became so weak waiting without proper food that they were hardly able to drag themselves to the nearest town. Some died by the

wayside, some drowned their children. One morning I saw ten bodies floating in the river.

"The president of our village union board kept telegraphing to Calcutta for food and Calcutta promised 25,000 maunds. Some food came weeks later—just 2,000 maunds. What was the use of that to a quarter of a million people?"

By the middle of August the poorer farmers had finished the last grains of their household food stocks. In order to live they sold their huts, their tiny fields, their wives' trinkets and even their cooking pots for food. Land sales tripled.

"We planned gruel kitchens and an emergency hospital," Jogesh continued. "We even had a rationing scheme. But what was the good if we could not get supplies? For a few weeks in September we could eat again—the *aus* rice was ready. But it does not keep long and in October it was finished."

I do not think Jogesh had a very clear idea how he survived those grim October weeks—hundreds of thousands of tons of rice slowly maturing all around, but not an edible grain among them. Then one fine morning a party of British troops landed from the Calcutta steamer. They wanted a site for a camp and a food dump. Unlike previous official visitors, they brought food instead of taking it away. More food was following them from Calcutta. They were working quickly. Within the day every hoarder in the surrounding villages knew. Rice from Calcutta; if the army was bringing it, it would surely arrive. And the new crop was less than a month away. Better sell now. Dramatic perhaps, but as it happens, true.

It is not fair to give the impression that there were large rice hoards left in the district. That was certainly not the case, but there were a number of small stocks which at Rs. 80 a maund represented considerable value. If more rice were to be made available in the district some one might even contrive to enforce the legal rate of Rs. 22-8 a maund for it. So

small lots began to appear almost miraculously. And for a time prices fell rapidly.

Though the distribution of imported supplies and the fall in grain prices were vitally important in halting the growth of the famine, they meant nothing to the people who were already destitute. They had to be fed free. Relief measures began in July 1943, and by the end of the year the Bengal Government estimated that more than 2,330,000 people, or one out of every 25 of the population, were in receipt of relief from 6,525 relief kitchens. No doubt in December the assistance which the civil authority received from the army in distributing food enabled these kitchens to be remain open. Previously many of them had worked spasmodically when supplies were available.

Relief for the destitute fell under three heads: the provision of free meals through soup kitchens; the organisation of rest camps, and medical treatment in emergency hospitals. The first stage was the soup kitchen, of which I watched many at work. Here a meal was supplied each day to every destitute who presented himself. Feeding time was arranged so that "customers"—particularly the many professional beggars among the destitutes—could not receive more than their share by going from kitchen to kitchen. There was little uniformity in the quantity and quality of the food supplied at the various kitchens because for months the organisers had to depend on supplies which were available locally. As a general rule the meal consisted of a khichuri of rice, dal, vegetables and bajri. In some places it was possible to give the destitutes fish once or twice a week, and in a few cases even meat. Where possible milk was given to mothers and children.

This single meal was not sufficient to maintain the strength of a person who was working, but the fact remains that in hundreds of thousands of cases it made all the difference between life and death. That it was made available at all was usually due solely to the energy of small handfuls of public-spirited organisers.

As one food kitchen organiser told me in Calcutta, " We know that this food will not support a man who has work to do. We are not trying to support working men; we are trying to prevent people from dying and we have to feed as many as possible with the very limited materials available."

The best answer to this controversy was the effect of these meals on the destitute. In the course of my tour I saw people who were putting in a first appearance at a kitchen; those who had been fed for a fortnight, and still others who had been supported by the kitchens for nearly three months. Those who had been longest on this diet were in the best condition.

The scheme of relief approved by the Bengal Government was that while free food should be doled out to everyone who was starving, the earliest possible measures should be taken to round up destitutes and place them in rest camps where they could be properly fed, medically treated and returned to their villages, when arrangements had been made to receive them there.

Such a scheme was eminently satisfactory—on paper. It had all the advantages of enabling food distribution to be centralised and of preventing the spread of epidemics by diseased destitutes. But as the authorities discovered, it was not very easy to carry out.

The remarkable exodus of destitutes from Calcutta was due less to their fear of entering the camps than to the authorities' methods of rounding them up. Police and A.R.P. lorries were used to raid congregations of destitutes in Calcutta streets—usually in the middle of the morning when the members of a family had dispersed in search of food. Often their captors were none too gentle. It was hardly surprising therefore that within 24 hours tens of thousands of destitutes were fleeing from the city. Voluntary relief workers protested strongly against such gross stupidity and for a day or two these " raids " stopped. But the damage was done. For days afterwards destitutes left Calcutta,

packing third class carriages on the railways, riding on the carriage roofs and even on the axles.

Mr. H. S. Suhrawardy, the Bengal Civil Supplies Minister, told me the exodus did not matter because Calcutta was ringed round by relief centres and the fleeing destitutes consequently could not starve. My own impression was very different. A very strongly organised relief system would have been needed to deal with such a migration, whereas Bengal arrangements were sheer improvisation and not very good improvisation at that!

Had more care been taken, the system of rest camps around Calcutta would probably have gone a long way towards solving the problem of the migrant destitute. By the end of the year those camps could accommodate 50,000 people and there were similar arrangements on a smaller scale around every main centre of population.

Unfortunately the destitutes disliked being grabbed on the street in the middle of the morning, thus losing contact with the few remaining relatives they had in the world. With that love of theory so typical of Bengal, official relief workers assured me that this fear was groundless because the destitutes would eventually be returned to their villages where they would all be reunited. That undoubtedly was the basis of the scheme, but since it made no allowance for death, human error or any of the other hundred and one accidents which can befall a person not far from death when he falls into the hands of a rickety relief organisation, my sympathy was with the destitutes, even though I appreciated the urgency of thorough-going assistance. Anyway the destitutes decided against the camps which explains why they were never more than partly filled.

One camp which I saw had 1,900 occupants and was capable of holding 4,000. On the whole it was well arranged in a Calcutta municipal *basti* which is a group of well built huts arranged around a tank and within four main walls. Each family had its own hut and groups of huts were marked with the name of the

village from which the occupants came. Here the occupants received good food—three meals a day and fish four times a week—clothes and medical treatment. The organisers of the camp reckoned that 40 per cent of the people they received required medical treatment which was provided by two resident doctors, four trained nurses and the assistance of medical students and other voluntary helpers.

The plan was to keep such people until they had recovered when, dressed in new clothes, they would be sent back to their village union relief centres where reception camps would be prepared. This determination to manage the stream of people and direct it back to the villages, as soon as local arrangements could be made, was absolutely essential. Those who have never had to deal with poor people in the last stages of starvation have little idea of the appalling change which comes over them, mentally as well as physically. It made me realise that human beings in such straits are very little removed from the animals. Completely without sophistication, these people, who had never seen a city before, were overawed by Calcutta. Many quickly developed the beggar mentality and became completely irresponsible. Here are two fantastic but true examples. At Divali (Hindu New Year) quite a few of those still at large in the city managed to buy fireworks, though they and their families were in imminent peril of death from starvation. At an open-air feeding centre I found a man offering cake for sale to people who were bags of bones. Relief workers told me that he even made some sales at times.

Do not imagine, however, that even in the later stages every one was accounted for by relief agencies. A couple of minutes after I had been told by a Bengal Minister of his Government's grandiloquent plans I counted twelve living skeletons while walking across Charnock Place, including a bundle of bones which had once been a baby. It was being given water from the gutter by a woman who was too emaciated to feed it. They were seated near a tram stop and were practically

trampled underfoot by the prosperous people of Calcutta. The babies were undoubtedly the worst feature of the whole tragic business. Little mites with centenarians' faces, sitting stark naked and alone in the keen morning air on the wide pavements of Dalhousie Square, were common enough. Famine babies have big heads and big tummies and legs and arms like twigs. Their extraordinary shape, once seen, can never be forgotten.

Nearly half the famine victims required medical attention, and of those admitted to hospital about one in four died. The arrangements for coping with this state of affairs left much to be desired. Before famine broke out the whole of Bengal had only about 8,400 hospital beds—for a population of 60 million. Calcutta, with a population of nearly 3½ million, had ten small general hospitals of which four were not open to destitutes. Under emergency arrangements 2,000 beds were made available for famine sickness cases and this number was later expanded to 3,000. In Dacca, the second city in Bengal, the National Medical Institute was capable of housing 400 destitute patients and a special ward in the Mitford Hospital was set aside for starvation cases. Army medical aid made it possible to provide 18,000 additional beds—16,000 of them being made available by the provincial government. Epidemics were to be combated by 500 extra doctors under the supervision of 60 army doctors. Even so, it is apparent that for months only a small proportion of the gravest cases could be hospitalised.

As might be expected, the quality of the hospitals and treatment varied widely. At Dacca and Narayanganj I saw model institutions of their kind. In Chandpur, where conditions had been very bad, doctors and nurses were fighting a dysentery epidemic in almost incredible conditions. They claimed that they were "managing somehow" to get drugs and other essentials, but elsewhere I discovered that official sources for these materials were so slow to respond that relief workers who had their own funds had long ago resorted to the Calcutta black market.

For example, despite large government stocks of quinine in Calcutta, Narayanganj, where a malaria epidemic had raged for weeks, could not obtain supplies, even in response to frantic official requests.

CHAPTER XV
SOLDIERS TO THE RESCUE

Even if you asked the Commander-in-Chief himself, I doubt if he could tell you just when the army began to intervene in the famine. The first stages were of course unofficial. British and Indian troops are kind hearted fellows, in spite of their critics, and the sight of starving humanity at the camp gates was too much for them. Scraps and shares of rations were handed out freely. At some places regular feeding times were unofficially organised while military medical men did what they could—short of filling their hospitals with unauthorised famine cases. I heard of several instances in which the men wanted to adopt orphans. The order that British troops would not receive rice merely recognised an existing state of affairs; the men had already decided that for themselves. Indian troops, though not asked to do so, volutarily cut their rice ration by two-thirds and used atta instead.

I also heard a number of anecdotes which showed that, on the whole, neither Tommies nor Sepoys were impressed by the attitude of the average middle class Bengali. There was the classic instance of the local landlord who came waddling up to a camp to protest about the troops feeding a couple of emaciated orphans lying under a tree opposite the camp gate. It turned out that the tree was on the gentleman's land and he had no wish to harbour dying beggars—he was afraid he might have to give them a funeral. Of course he had taken no steps to relieve them. Little time was wasted on explaining to him that the camp found itself

completely out of agreement with his views on the famine problem.

Then there was the supply officer who built an eight-foot fence around his grain dump because he and his men could not bear to see the famine stricken sitting round and gazing at it all day. Short of bringing down a court martial on themselves, they were handing out everything that could be spared.

Consequently, when the Viceroy, having seen the position for himself, requested military assistance for the Bengal Government, officers and men set to work with a will. I was with one of the first lorry convoys to leave Calcutta. Its officers and men had been given an hour's notice of their trip. They spent most of the night loading their lorries with 4,000 maunds of rice from Howrah warehouses—a fantastic job in the black-out—with godown keepers who either could not or would not keep proper count of the sacks. The bags had to be weighed and adjusted to two maunds each. I watched the weighing and wondered at the patience of that small party of officers and N.C.O.s. With maddening monotony the warehouse attendants attempted to short-weight each bag as it passed the scales. As one disillusioned N.C.O. said, " You'd think we were pinching the——stuff for ourselves instead of for their own bleedin' people."

The convoy snatched a couple of hours sleep and were ready to start before dawn on a journey which should not have taken more than three hours; it took nearer seven, thanks to the stupidity of minor civilian officials.

All around us were vast expanses of rice slowly turning yellow—another three weeks before it would be ripe. Curiously enough we saw few bad destitution cases in the villages along our route, though near rail-way level crossings there were little groups of scare-crow women and children scratching among the ballast for grain dropped from passing trains. Most villagers in that area looked quite well fed—evidently they were living on their own stocks. But judging by the prices

of dal and gur in most of the village shops—not one admitted to having any rice—no one could afford to live on their supplies.

As we went further from Calcutta it was clear that conditions were becoming steadily worse until at our destination the local officials, who took over the rice brought by the convoy, told me that there had been 520 famine deaths in the 48 village unions in their subdivision. Yet comparatively speaking, this had not been a seriously affected area. Surprisingly sturdy looking porters were waiting to unload the long procession of army trucks which seemed to wind endlessly along the village roads. These men, I discovered, had been sent to help by the local jute factory which, like most other large employers in Bengal, had secured supplies for its own workers. By degrees the 2,000 bags we had brought were piled on hessian outside the chief official's home. As the last bag was off loaded the "reception committee" of officials discovered they were several bags short. But they had not bargained for the officer in charge of the convoy insisting on a recount then and there, even if it did mean climbing over mounds of sacks in the hot sun for another hour. Fifteen minutes later they discovered where their "mistake" in counting had occurred, receipts were signed and the long train of lorries prepared to start back to Calcutta. It was an interesting experience because it soon became apparent to me that the army took famine relief a good deal more seriously than did Bengal officialdom.

The lines on which the army would work had been clearly laid down by the Commander-in-Chief, General Sir Claude Auchinleck. Of the several thousand troops employed, two-thirds of the units were motorised and used their own transport to carry grain. They were to be engaged for three months which was considered a reasonable period in which to restore the confidence of the people. The army was not responsible for the province's food distribution policy or for the procurement of food. It was there to assist the Bengal Government in carrying out its plans.

Major-General A. V. T. Wakely was placed in charge of movement, under the orders of the Bengal Government, and he was in contact with Lieut-General A.O.M. Mayne, G.O.C.-in-C. Eastern Command, under whom came Major-General D. Stuart, the officer responsible for providing the troops and transport needed by Major-General Wakely.

The broad outline of the plan was to speed up the movement of supplies, which had piled up in Calcutta, to about twenty distributing centres in the districts. A military officer, parallel to the civil administration, was placed in each area while troops were provided to guard the food, prevent looting on the way, help in unloading and build temporary accommodation for food if necessary.

Had it been peacetime, the undertaking would have been comparatively easy; but a total war was in progress and as the Commander-in-Chief said, the matter was complicated because the movement of food had to be co-ordinated with military movements—" We are fighting the Japanese on the borders of Assam and eastern Bengal and there is a movement of troops which must go on.

" Nothing would have pleased the army better than to have started sooner," he added, " but the army is doing its own job to beat the Japs. Until our aid is definitely asked for, we get on with that job. As a matter of fact, the army did quite a lot unofficially before we were asked to come to the Bengal Government's help."

The reminder that the army was in eastern India to fight a war was necessary because as soon as it became known that the Viceroy had asked for military assistance, there was a remarkable tendency in the country to forget about the Japanese and to assume that the army could drop everything else until Bengal had been saved. Of course it was not long before acidulated critics began to develop the theme that the army was only doing what it ought to have allowed the civilians to do long before—that is, to organise enough transport

to move the food out of Calcutta. However, such allegations cannot be taken too seriously when we consider how slight had been the civil attempt to do this vital work.

For some reason best known to themselves, the Bengal Government preferred to have all food from outside the province delivered in Calcutta, instead of directly to the famine areas. The only credible explanation for such amazing stupidity was that the Bengal Civil Supplies Department did not know where the stuff was most needed and could not arrange a supply programme. That statement may seem fantastic, but Mr. Suhrawardy admitted to me that he had not made even a provisional distribution plan, and when I went to the districts, it became clear that local calls for help had received little response in Calcutta.

Had Calcutta been in the middle of Bengal, with good transport lines to all parts of the province, the idea of using the city as a central depot would not have been so bad, but Calcutta is tucked away in a corner and communications are about as awkward as they can well be and still remain communications. There are few roads leading out of Calcutta ; river transport involves a long series of detours, and the railways form bottlenecks. In the middle of a war all these difficulties are accentuated.

On the other hand, transport problems did not prevent food from many parts of India piling up in Calcutta. There has been a good deal of controversy about how much grain Bengal actually did receive, so let me offer a sidelight on what had happened. Before the army gave its assistance, food was leaving Calcutta at the rate of only 900 tons a day, perhaps less. The army soon boosted these despatches to 2,200 tons daily. The assumption that army aid would be needed for three months suggests that nearly 200,000 tons of grain had to be moved, quite apart from the supplies still entering Bengal which General Wakely diverted to the needy districts before they had a chance to reach Calcutta.

Two hundred thousand tons of food in Calcutta, a city which does not grow a grain of rice! With an efficient civil supplies organisation such a block should never have been possible. But it was so. Rice coming in from the Central Provinces and Orissa passed across the Midnapur famine area—and the railway waggons often went back empty for at least part of the way. Grain from the Punjab and the United Provinces came all the way down the Ganges valley along which there are several points where the trains could have been diverted to east Bengal—but it was not done.

Once it had been requested, military action came with surprising speed. Staffs worked seventeen and eighteen hours a day to complete plans, collect transport wherever possible and send out parties along the lines of supply and to the reception areas.

On the fourth day after the inception of military co-operation, despatches from Calcutta had jumped from 900 tons to 1,500 tons daily. General Wakely, with his desk covered with maps in a bare temporary office in the heart of Calcutta's business centre, cheerfully drew bold blue circles round the names of shortage areas, told his visitors they might come in handy as porters and sent out sheaves of telegrams which brought sighs of relief in the districts.

His motto was that wherever a villager could take his bullock cart, there the army would deliver food. Over in Fort William, General Stuart heartily agreed. Not that army assistance meant unlimited transport; it didn't, but 40 railway waggons a day were made available for movement out of Calcutta, instead of the 15 used a week previously. River boats had been rounded up, so that 400 tons of food a day could float down the Hooghly. Army lorries in long convoys were steadily taking out more.

Ahead of them all went the warning to local authorities that rapid movement and distribution were essential. Vehicles and boats must be unloaded and returned immediately. No excuse for delay would be accepted. To the average easy-going Bengali official

in the districts all this was rather undignified. In any case, what about the precious papers, orders, challans, forms and what not which could save the necessity of making a decision for a week or with luck for a month? Curiously enough the necessary papers accompanied delivery. Army officers insisted on sacks being unloaded when they arrived, on papers being signed as soon as the consignment was counted. The day when supplies could be left lying in river boats for three weeks, while people died, because the consignment note was lost had passed; at any rate, so far as the army was concerned.

At the same time it was revealed that the army was doing everything to conserve local supplies. All military labour in Bihar, Bengal and Orissa, including 50,000 men, women and children, was fed by the army. Local purchases of milk, chickens, and vegetables were drastically cut, while all detachments sent out on food movement duty not only carried their own rations with them but took food for distribution to the people.

There need be no hesitation in describing the results of army assistance as spectacular. Speaking late in January, when operations had been in progress for ten weeks, General Mayne revealed that between November 5 and December 31 more than 117,000 tons of supplies had been handled by the military authorities, while the total mileage run was in excess of a quarter of a million. During January 5,000 tons of food and clothing were being handled daily. Ten million people had received direct aid in the form of food, clothing and medical assistance by the end of 1943.

The army speed up of supplies was widespread. Military transport was used even in Orissa to move food grains to rail-heads at the rate of 240 tons a day.

The rapid movement of food in bulk was only a part of the military work for Bengal. At first it was agreed that a certain amount of medical aid should also be provided, but in the end the military authorities considered medical treatment to have been the major part of their work. By March 31 over 750,000 cases had

been treated, of which 599,511 were malaria cases. General Stuart considered that the prevalence of malaria was four or five times greater than normal, and added that there was hardly a single hut he had entered that had not had deaths from malaria or had someone down with it. The army also carried out many thousands of inoculations against cholera and smallpox and hospitalised thousands of cases who were suffering from diseases caused by semi-starvation.

General Stuart revealed what can only be described as a scandalous state of affairs in civilian medical relief—the grave shortage of inoculators and vaccinators to fight the epidemics. An epidemic staff several hundred strong was recruited on a reasonably good wage by the Government of Bengal, but only a very few actually reported for duty in the districts to which they were posted.

The area covered by army medical relief was tremendous and serious disease was often discovered in most isolated spots. For this purpose an ingenious system of patrols was built up. Troops were sent out into the district surrounding their headquarters, with instructions to make immediate reports on health conditions. This method saved much time in revealing outbreaks of disease and in sending out help. Thus remote villages on the upper reaches of the Brahmaputra and Megna rivers were brought within reach of modern medical science.

All told, the army opened 16 static hospitals with full staffs. They treated 100 to 300 patients each. Sixty-one army mobile treatment centres were also opened. The army also achieved the private soldier's ambition to look after the orphans. The men running the food lorries had instructions to bring in to the local centres all abandoned children, from babies in arms to youngsters of 14 and 15. The army could not turn itself into an orphanage but it helped local children's homes to cope with the rush.

As I have indicated, everyone in the armed forces in Bengal was keenly interested in this work. Some of

the officers saw something more in it than the immediate relief of an area just behind the front. They believed that when the great advance came through Burma and Malaya the army would have much the same problems to face in the newly occupied areas, since the Japs would leave the local population without food, while the disorganisation caused by war would probably produce epidemics if we were not ready for them. They therefore saw the experience gained in Bengal as an excellent form of training.

The results produced by the army made me wonder whether, had circumstances permitted, complete military control of food supplies and medical arrangements would have saved much mortality and distress. Of course for the soldiers preparing to fight the Japanese, Bengal relief could only be a side-show, but I do not think everyone in the army was altogether satisfied when they handed supplies over to local officials that every last man in the area would get his share. Personally, I was very far from being satisfied. What happened after the military convoy delivered the goods provided too much room for doubt. To me it was one of the major tragedies of the situation that force of circumstances prevented army co-operation being much more widely extended. Had that been possible I believe that ten per cent of Bengal's people would have had a square deal for the first time in their lives.

CHAPTER XVI

NEED IT HAVE HAPPENED?

Though the Bengal famine was recognised as such by the outside world sometime in July or August 1943, conditions were far from satisfactory seven or eight months previously. True, to a lesser degree, supply arrangements were also unsatisfactory in most other parts of India which had to depend on outside suppliers for part of their food. Let us admit that consider-

able dislocation and loss were caused by the denial policy in east Bengal, by the panic in Calcutta, the sabotage campaign in August and September 1942, the tidal wave in east Bengal, the Midnapur cyclone and the Damodar floods. Even though 1½ millions tons of rice were lost in Midnapur and vital supplies were held up by the River Damodar's behaviour at a critical period of the 1943 monsoon, need widespread famine have broken out? Why was it necessary for Mrs. Vijayalakshmi Pandit and Pandit Kunzru to go and discover the true state of affairs?

Even if there was only enough food in the province to put the population on half rations (and Bengal is supposed to be 83 per cent self-sufficient) why was not a determined attempt made to do this? Why was even a great centre like Calcutta without a rationing scheme until January 1944 when the Government of India insisted on action being taken? Why did not the authorities secure the ten million ton Aman rice crop, which was maturing while the famine raged? In February and March 1944—a month after the harvest was over—the Bengal Civil Supplies Department were still waiting for prices to fall before buying. Why was it possible for Bombay to take steps to secure the people's food while Bengal found it impossible? How was it that Bombay, Madras and practically every other shortage area could make their claims for more supplies heard in Delhi while Bengal could not?

I do not pretend to know the answers to all these questions. I can only indicate some of the circumstances. The first is that available food supplies in Bengal have never been properly rounded up, controlled or rationed. That fact alone meant serious trouble in a period when the population was nervous and the normal imported supply from Burma was cut off.

As to why action was not taken there is a variety of explanations. I leave the reader to judge how sound they are. According to Dr. Shyam Prasad Mookerjee, Sir John Herbert, the late Governor of Bengal, made the food supply his special interest, relied on the ser-

vices of a single European I.C.S. man and refused to allow the Fazlul Huq cabinet to touch it. Delhi explained their ignorance of the situation by saying that Mr. Fazlul Huq had told a food conference early in 1943 that so long as Bengal was left alone and not expected to join in an all-India scheme, the province could pull through. Dr. Mookerjee insisted that Mr. Huq made it clear on that occasion that Bengal would need some wheat.

Regarding this state of affairs I would like to note two points. If Sir John Herbert refused to allow his cabinet to administer food, why did Mr. Fazlul Huq take part on Bengal's behalf in Delhi food conferences? Surely that was the job of the Governor's I.C.S. assistant. On the other hand, if the Fazlul Huq cabinet considered the Governor was forcing them into a false position why did they not make an issue of it, or even resign? It is a matter of history that they did not do so.

The second point is Mr. Huq's failure to make the position of his province clear to Delhi. Either he was not familiar with the real state of affairs or he was putting politics before the people's vital needs. Merely to say his province would require some wheat was a gross understatement of the case.

The next complication was the change of Governments at the end of March 1943. Khwaja Sir Nazimuddin formed a cabinet in succession to Mr. Huq, with Mr. Suhrawardy as Minister of Civil Supplies; Mr. Suhrawardy appears to have had a free hand in working out his department's policy. Ever since the change in Governments the two groups have been at each other's throats; there has been no vestige of co-operation, and wherever I went in Bengal the Hindu Mahasabha (of which Dr Mookerjee, who was in the Huq Government, is the head) was carrying on propaganda against the Nazimuddin administration.

Why did Mr. Suhrawardy do nothing? His reply is that the Huq Government had bungled things so badly that the situation was already out of hand before

he took over. He claims that he has received very little co-operation, and that his opponents have been chiefly interested in making political capital out of the disaster. He had also worked out a great many excellent schemes, but circumstances always seem to have prevented their operation. Mr. Suhrawardy has in fact been most unfortunate.

Closely surrounding this controversy was the particularly fierce quarrel over the operations of the firm of Ispahani, who were made sole food grain buying agents to the Bengal Government. The Messrs. Ispahani are also most unfortunate because, except for accusations of cannibalism, practically every other crime has been alleged against them. They have also been ably defended and during the controversy no concrete evidence was produced against them. I do not propose to go into the details of this controversy. It was fought out with great bitterness in the Bengal Assembly at a time when tens of thousands of people were dying. Many who are in no way connected with Bengal consider that the amount of time wasted on this quarrel by the province's parties constitutes the greatest blot on Bengal's political annals.

Even when the plight of Bengal was known, controversy was not stilled. The Punjab—one of Bengal's major suppliers—accused Mr. Suhrawardy of profiteering on the distribution of Punjab grain. After violent protests, Mr. Suhrawardy made the interesting discovery that the rates worked out by his department would leave the provincial Government with a profit of Rs. 4 lakhs on only a few months' operations. Promises were made that this oversight would be adjusted. A second charge that Calcutta millers were being allowed to charge extravagantly high rates for processing grain was met with the reply that the scale agreed upon had been put forward by an advisory committee of millers. It is, however, unnecessary to labour these points.

Let us return for a moment to the situation inside Bengal. Early in 1943 Mr. Suhrawardy undertook a hunt for hoarded stocks. This step became the excuse for violent political controversy and, so far as I am aware, no findings were ever published, though I was told that 350,000 tons of rice were revealed. No attempt appears to have been made to put into circulation the hoards which were unearthed. Mr. Suhrawardy's silence has been variously interpreted and at one point the public outside Bengal was encouraged to assume that the drive had failed because there was nothing to find. If that were the case Mr. Suhrawardy's measures to make the position clear in Delhi and the Punjab and to distribute equitably the food that was sent to Bengal, cannot be described as over-energetic.

The failure to act in the districts was commonly attributed to the power of the zamindars. According to this argument these landlords stood between the people and Calcutta, so that Government never knew what the position really was. It is also alleged that they prevented the local officials from carrying out Calcutta's orders.

I hold no brief for zamindars. Perhaps they did impede food administration in certain areas. On the other hand, in the areas through which I passed the local officials seem to have known exactly what was happening from week to week and claimed to have kept Calcutta posted with information and indeed snowed under with demands for help and guidance. They thought the fault lay entirely with Calcutta for ignoring the news which was pouring in all the time from the districts.

As for the zamindars interfering with actual food administration, I am not qualified to speak. But I do know that the zamindars were not the only criminals. Droves of speculators were allowed to operate, and indeed one of the main reasons why Bengal's

neighbouring provinces refused to co-operate in the Eastern Zone free trade scheme was that they knew that the grain, which both their own people and the Bengalis needed, was being bought for Bengal speculators' hoards. When questioned on his reasons for not asserting Government's authority in such circumstances, Mr. Suhrawardy has often explained that in such a delicate situation too much interference would have destroyed public confidence and made matters worse. He made much the same excuse for not bringing the 1943-44 rice crop under control. According to him, a free rice market would restore confidence. Perhaps he was right, though some of us may be excused for supposing, may be rashly, that by the time there were several lakhs of dead bodies lying around the province, something stronger than a revival of confidence among the hoarders was required.

Even so, all these facts do not explain very satisfactorily why it was impossible to get a move on. Let me offer one or two more points. One is the extraordinary state of affairs among the Bengal Government's subordinate employees. No one seems to bother to deny that the average small official was as deeply in the black market as the richest professional speculator. As to why people like the lower grades of the police did not bring more cases of hoarding to the notice of those concerned, I was given a startling but possibly reasonable explanation. "A rural policeman is paid seven rupees a month", said my informant. "A maund of rice used to be worth five rupees. It is now worth fifty rupees. So what?" I think in most cases the local police received regular rations, whatever the price of rice. But imagine the potential power for corruption wielded by a man hoarding a commodity the value of which had increased ten times while lying in his warehouse!

To give the minor official his due, however, I think even speculators' bribes might have counted for little had the Bengal Secretariat shown more energy. When

the army took over the movement of supplies, I was told that the staff they found was so small that even going flat out it could not possibly have coped with the work. I also left Calcutta with the strong impression that there were still too many officials attending office at 11 a.m. and leaving at 3 p.m.

So far we have discussed possible reasons for the famine. Now for the question: "Need It Have Happened?" The answer is clearly, "No." I may be told that, considering the facts which I have already detailed and price inflation which I have hardly mentioned, disaster was bound to have occurred. But please note that at least two-thirds of the factors pushing the situation towards famine were *avoidable.*

By the end of 1942 Bengal faced a very grave crisis indeed, but the problem was not insoluble, given the one missing ingredient—firm action. The real tragedy was that no one was sufficiently determined to achieve anything. Excellent plans were published—and disregarded. Even reducing the situation to its simplest, it would have been possible for the Bengal authorities to take the line that internal supplies were so short and hoarding so bad that it was practically impossible to do anything except distribute food from outside the province through strictly controlled agencies. True, imported food was obtained, but six months too late. Bengal blamed Delhi and the Punjab for not helping sooner. Perhaps Delhi, in spite of provincial autonomy, should have been more inquisitive; but the fact remains that Bengal persistently soft-pedalled her difficulties until they started to block the streets of Calcutta with their emaciated bodies.

I personally cannot escape the conclusion that the Bengal famine was entirely man-made. I do not claim that competent management would have maintained the province as a land of plenty. Severe rationing would have been necessary for several months, price control could have been imposed, and enough food to prevent disaster could have been brought in and *distributed*, had there been the will to do these things.

CHAPTER XVII

PERMANENT FAMINE?

I was returning to Calcutta after a day among the destitutes. Dusk fell while the train spent one of its usual half-hours waiting to run into Howrah. Stretching away from the railway were lush water meadows and green and yellow rice fields where the colours became momentarily intense as the primrose tints of the sky faded and a strange blueness pervaded the dusk.

A wandering sadhu lit his tiny lamps beside a pool and conches sounded mournfully through the gathering gloom. Dimly seen white figures moved by the water's edge while high above them the graceful silhouettes of palms were ranged against the pale sky. The bitter-sweet smoke of cottage cooking fires drifted across the heavy air, and this almost too perfect picture of the Bengal dusk was sprinkled with hundreds of fire flies.

It was difficult to believe that so much delicately tinted beauty was the background of disaster; that this soft luxuriance had failed to support the men and women born among it. Famine in such surroundings seemed a fantasy with more than a touch of malice in it. Or was it simply that I had come to Bengal to witness a readjustment of elemental forces which no amount of profiteering, charity or fertile soil could deflect? Had Mother Earth's capacity to support so many offspring been overstrained, until the inevitable reaction came, regardless of the pangs inflicted on the individual? Followers of a passive philosophy would undoubtedly find such ideas attractive for would they not provide the mystical excuse for that inaction which is apt to characterise Bengal's human society in times of trouble ?

But we are interested in something more finite than mysticism; instead, we want the facts about the province's population and food supply. Baldly put, the population of Bengal, living on their ridiculously fer-

tile mud banks, had multiplied beyond the point at which the land at its present level of production could support them. According to official statistics Bengal's crops could feed only 83 out of every 100 people in the province. Moreover, the human surplus was increasing at the rate of a million beings a year. Unless man's ingenuity intervened to save the situation, Nature would proceed, in the only ways she knew, to disencumber herself of this over-abundant population. That meant starvation, pestilence and death. Bengal's history is not unfamiliar with the cycle in which her people have to pay the penalty for breeding too fast and for forcing their nutrition and living standards down below the point where any passing hurricane can precipitate widespread disaster.

The unpleasant fact is that by 1943 a very large number of human beings had become surplus to the natural economic needs of the province. Indeed Bengal village society was one of the finest extant examples of human parasitism. Millions of men and women not only existed but reared families on the proceeds of charity. By that I mean the practice of paying other people a pittance to do odd jobs, which you could easily do for yourself, had developed to an extravagant degree. There was thus a dangerously high percentage of the population which owed its very existence to religious and social prejudices and to the capacity of the rest of the community to maintain that way of life. One particular group of outcasts were three million strong and there were many more like them. The tasks they performed for a return of four or five annas a day, however flattering they might be to laziness and prejudice, were not essential to the maintenance of life in Bengal. The performers of those tasks were in fact parasites. This view in no way contradicts my earlier conclusion that Bengal's human administration could have avoided this disaster. The writing had been flashing like a neon sign on the wall for a generation.

Ninety per cent of Bengal lives in the villages—in an agricultural society; yet that agricultural society did not produce enough food to maintain itself, let alone the other ten per cent of the population living in the towns. Such a maladjustment between population and production was in itself a signal of grave danger. When we add that an unduly large—and increasing—proportion of the rural population lived off the proceeds of agriculture without having any stake in the land, the march of catastrophe was inevitable.

Famine does not come like a thunderbolt. As we have already noticed, a regular seasonal shortage before the ripening of the winter rice crop had become a feature of Bengal's agricultural year. As the population increased and food production remained stationary—or fell—that annual famine was intensified. Moreover the state of malnutrition in the province was another grave warning.

I believe that, given adequate control, the 1943 famine could have been avoided. But enforcement of equitable distribution of an inadequate food supply, while it may overcome a crisis, is not a complete cure if the basic position is as unsound as it is in Bengal. Even if food can be imported in unlimited amounts and perfectly distributed, trouble must occur so long as a section of the population cannot afford to buy it. Those classes of the population who exist by labouring for landholders who raise an amount of produce inadequate to the needs of the community are not going to have the means to buy sustenance from another community. It is true that before the war Bengal eked out an existence by buying rice from Burma. But that rice was mainly eaten by the very small percentage of the population whose productivity lay outside the sphere of agriculture. The proof of that is that even when Burmese rice was coming freely into Bengal, the annual shortage among the villagers was not relieved.

In such circumstances the relief of one famine does not remove the risk of another. Unless there is deci-

sive intervention and reorganisation of Bengal's rural economy, famine or the diseases springing from under-nourishment must recur until population and food supplies balance again. That is the natural law and no amount of human subtlety can defeat it.

Nature's way of righting the crisis is to reduce the number of mouths to be fed. Human society, which condemns this method of adjustment because its own existence is thereby endangered, must work from the opposite direction and increase the available food supply. For this purpose it is necessary either to intensify food production per acre, or bring more acres under cultivation or, by the development of rural industries, increase the capacity of the people to buy their food All three steps can be taken in Bengal. The Bengali farmer is a good rice grower by Indian standards; but as these standards are the lowest in the world, improvements in manures and seeds, to name only two factors, should make a great deal of difference.

As for putting more land under food crops, there seems to be very little doubt that jute acreage could be reduced. I am not sufficiently familiar with the jute trade to be dogmatic, but if pre-war conditions are any criterion it seems possible that the prospects of jute cloth as a cheap packing material are limited. Should Bengal manage to attain a higher standard of living it is not certain that jute could still be produced cheaply enough to compete with other packing materials which have been developed in recent years. On the other hand, a number of new and profitable uses for jute have been investigated and it seems possible that a smaller and more profitable crop might be the best thing for all concerned. Extra land for rice would thus be made available. It has been suggested that jute land will not yield good rice. Both jute and rice growers in Bengal told me that is nonsense.

For the present Bengal is being supported by heavy imports of grain from the rest of India and overseas. Calcutta is entirely fed from outside the province,

along with large buyers such as tea gardens, collieries and other industries. To maintain adequate distribution Mr. Suhrawardy proposed in November 1943 to build up Government stocks all over the province, in order to keep profiteers and black markets in check. He said that Government buying would be cautious so that the market level would not be forced up and added, somewhat bombastically, that his Government was "now under no necessity to purchase stocks and it will no longer be possible for traders and speculators any longer to purchase against Government in the hope of forcing Government to purchase at higher prices."

If Mr. Suhrawardy imagined for a moment that such threats would frighten Bengal's hoarders and profiteers, he was sadly mistaken. For months, practically every trader in Bengal had openly flouted orders issued by the Civil Supplies Department. Something stronger than words was needed. Furthermore, while Government's purchasing methods might be theoretically correct in normal market conditions, Mr. Suhrawardy's statement suggested that he did not propose to exclude competitive buying and that he had a fairly poor opinion of the prospects of enforcing his own price control order. Three months later he was still waiting for rice prices to come down to the level at which he was prepared to buy.

Control—real control—of prices and procurement has still to come in Bengal. It demands a degree of energy and efficient administration which is as yet unusual in that province.

But food at controlled prices and quantities will not feed destitute people, of whom there are hundreds of thousands in Bengal today. Already the 1943 famine has cost the Government of Bengal Rs. 11½ crores, and as yet no long-term rehabilitation programme has made its appearance. Robust measures are necessary because the famine has deprived vast numbers of families of their land, tools and health. Many are incapable of satisfactorily earning a living for some time to come. The proportion of landless population in rural areas

has considerably increased. Unless occupations can be found for these people a dangerous situation must persist because any future rise in prices or temporary food shortage will precipitate starvation among them.

There is a move on foot to restore land to those who were forced to sell out. The wisdom of such a plan, unless supported by a variety of other measures, is open to question. The majority of those who lost their holdings were the smallest cultivators whose land did not produce enough to support their families. Merely to put these families back on the land again is to restore the pre-1943 status quo which was far from satisfactory. The larger needs of the province indicate the necessity of using the land to much better advantage than in the past. That means consolidation of holdings rather than the perpetuation of fragmentation. Bengal's over-populated state also means that too many people are concerned with agricultural production. This surplus labour should be diverted to other work, preferably in rural industries which are sadly lacking in Bengal. It would thus be possible to free the land for better, heavier crops and to create the power to purchase imported food if need arose. Until such steps are taken the risk of famine must remain.

Bengal has the labour, the land and the climate to achieve great results, but having seen the province at its worst, I cannot resist the temptation of hoping that if an improvement in the standard of living can be achieved the population will not teem quite as superabundantly as at present. A somewhat lower birthrate and a better standard of health are urgently required. I realise that remarks about lowering the birthrate are anathema to most Indian politicians who fear that contraception would deprive them of votes, but there is a good deal to be said for combating the urge to breed away every economic advantage, a phenomenon only too evident in Bengal at present.

CHAPTER XVIII
FAMINES CAN ALSO FAIL

While famine was raging in Bengal, four other areas of India were also facing the risk of starvation. They were the Bijapur district of Bombay, where a state of famine was declared; the Ceded Districts of Madras; parts of Orissa, and the States of Cochin and Travancore. In order to preserve perspective about what can be done to prevent or relieve famine in India, even under the handicap of wartime transport, I propose to detail briefly events in these areas.

Bijapur, in the Bombay Karnatak, has always suffered from an errant monsoon and is an area of almost permanent shortage. Two poor monsoons in succession are therefore enough to precipitate famine. Trouble began when the 1942 rains fell short of expectations and early in 1943 relief works were opened. At the height of the scarcity some 40,000 people were employed on building contour bunds, apart from other works and gratuitous relief. The Bombay Government spent a crore of rupees on the work and during 1944-45 expected to spend another Rs. 70 lakhs on land development in Bijapur and neighbouring districts in order to immunise the area against famine. Food for Bijapur was provided by earmarking the surplus from certain other districts and by sending there part of the imports which Bombay procured from outside the province. Considerable funds and supplies of clothes for Bijapur people were collected by non-official organisations.

The most important points about Bijapur are that although most of the district was practically without food or any other resources, there do not appear to have been any famine deaths; nor did destitutes spread themselves over the neighbouring towns of Sholapur, Poona, Bombay etc.

On the other hand, the Bombay Government seized the opportunity offered by so much available labour to launch a programme of contour bund building in

order to prevent further soil erosion and to conserve moisture. Contour bunds are little more than large ridges of soil raised at right angles to the slope of the land at fairly frequent intervals. They are valuable because much of Bijapur's rainfall comes in the form of sudden downpours, the water from which is trapped by the bunds and held until it has had time to soak into the soil. Contour bunding is almost a form of terracing and was already quite well known before the Bijapur scheme was put into operation. But in Bijapur the scale of operations was larger than anything attempted previously. Preliminary results have been most encouraging.

The Ceded Districts are more or less Bijapur's "opposite number" in Madras territory. Here again a dry area ran into famine as a result of a succession of unusually poor monsoons. Relief cost the Madras Government Rs. 2½ crores. Once again the official organisation was able to prevent the situation getting out of hand. No one denies that there was acute distress, but it never deteriorated into the state of pestilence and death which was so common in Bengal. With the maturing of the 1943 crops, and the elaboration of provincial food distribution schemes the situation was considered to be so well in hand that in their 1944-45 budget estimates the Madras Government only made the usual Rs. 14 lakhs provision for famine relief.

Orissa, being a neighbour of Bengal, was to a certain extent affected by events in the latter province. The cyclone which devastated south-west Bengal late in 1942 also hit the coastal tracts of Orissa, areas where much rice is grown. A considerable number of destitutes seem to have gone from south-west Bengal to Orissa and their appearance undoubtedly increased nervousness among holders of food stocks in Orissa. Prices rose and many people, poverty stricken by the cyclone, could not afford to buy food. Visitors to the province compared conditions in certain areas with those in Bengal and at times there was considerable criticism of the Orissa Government's sales of rice to

Bengal. No details are yet available of the number of deaths but it is significant that after his visit to Orissa in December 1943, the Viceroy donated a lakh of rupees from his Distress Relief Fund for the establishment of orphanages for child victims of the famine. It would seem, however, that there was a considerable degree of co-operation between officials and non-officials in organising relief. By the end of 1943, the main needs were medicines and clothing, rather than food.

Turning to the far South of India, we find in Cochin and Travancore conditions which were potentially even worse than those in Bengal. Whereas Bengal is at least 83 per cent self-supporting, Cochin and Travancore, with 7½ million people, grow only 45 per cent of their food. In normal times they imported most of the balance from Burma. Many parts of these States are extremely thickly populated, the standard of living is very low for a large proportion of the people and the area is the furthest removed of any in India from the main cereal growing provinces—the Punjab, the United Provinces and Sind. The 1941 and 1942 monsoons were poor. The only saving factor seems to have been that the States' towns lacked the financial and speculative power of Calcutta. Here again, details of the famine's development are difficult to procure, because while he seems to have made the situation very plain in Delhi, the Dewan of Travancore, Sir C. P. Ramaswami Aiyar, successfully evaded publicity for many months.

A serious epidemic of cholera in 1943 and high prices for grain caused acute distress, especially among the poorest classes. But even under such disadvantages affairs never reached the hopeless state of Bengal. Malabar grows a good deal of tapioca and in the coastal villages fish was available. A vigorous "Grow More Food" campaign was also operated. Thus on the whole, conditions of distress never degenerated into wholesale famine. Official relief work was gravely handicapped by the diversion to Bengal of grain intended for Malabar. Fortunately, Sir Ramaswami

Aiyar proved a redoubtable champion for the people of both Travancore and Cochin and plainly told Delhi that unless attention was paid to their condition it would not be possible for him " to undertake responsibility for the good temper and continued patience of the people." These remarks were very different from the empty assurance that conditions were expected to be normal within a few days, which was heard much too often in India in 1943. Moreover, the Dewan of Travancore was equally loud in his demand that food procurement and distribution should be firmly regimented on an all-India scale.

Apart from the difficulty of extremely short supplies, grain prices could not be brought within reach of the poorest people in these States and though the Dewan at first set his face against accepting outside financial aid, he did at length agree that certain philanthropic bodies should assist in subsidising and distributing grain to the needy. His reason for discouraging financial aid at first was not misplaced pride but the fact that before money could be of any use, the necessary supplies of grain had to be secured. Relief funds spent on the extremely limited supplies in the State would have caused further inflation of prices, a development which would have made matters worse instead of better. In any case, it was essential to keep attention fixed on the prime business of procuring supplies. The value of the work done in these States was abundantly recognised by the Food Grains Policy Committee.

In adding this review of 1943's " other famines " to the chronicle of Bengal, I would like to make two points clear. The first is that although considerable areas and populations were involved and although the amount of publicity given to them was small, none of these scarcities actually developed into uncontrollable famine.

Secondly, the basic causes of these scarcities were the same as in Bengal : Adverse climatic conditions, local deficiencies of supply, rising prices which took grain out of reach of the poorest people, and transport

bottlenecks which held up the arrival of outside supplies.

That imponderable factor, " the human element," was the chief reason why distress did not become sheer disaster.

PART FOUR: WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

CHAPTER XIX
A PROBLEM OF BIOLOGY

The population of India is at present increasing at the rate of five million people a year. Seen against a background of a deficient and possibly decreasing home-grown food supply, such an inexorable multiplication of humanity, regardless of its prospects of survival, has a nightmare quality. It pushes forward into our discussion a question more serious than any we have yet examined: Can any method of tackling the population and food problem do more than stave off eventual disaster?

Even if by a gigantic effort Indian food production could be doubled in the next ten years, would not the rising tide of humanity soon make the position worse than it is today? So far as we can see at present, there must be a limit to the amount of food India can raise at home or buy abroad; on the other hand, there does not appear to be any limit to the possible growth of her population, which indeed seems to be accelerating. Furthermore, the modern trend is to increase markedly the chances of human survival in India. Improvements in medical and public health services, scheduled for execution after the war, will still further aid the growth of population. Slashing the rates of maternal and infant mortality and the conquest of malaria (which alone is believed to account for a million deaths a year)

will be sufficient to cause a significant increase in a single generation.

We are faced with the risk of breeding away economic advantages, either present or future. I have already mentioned this possibility in the case of Bengal, where over-population has reached serious proportions. On the all-India scale, the risk appears to be equally great, when the rate of population growth is considered in relation to the country's average productive capacity in present day conditions.

Is there any way of preventing India literally eating herself out of house and home? The obvious cure is to bring the birthrate into a healthy relation to the food supply. Several methods of achieving this goal have been suggested, including a rise in the standard of living. It is generally assumed that once a community reaches a certain level of prosperity the birthrate automatically falls; that the capacity for reproduction is in inverse ratio to the standard of living.

Can this result be obtained in India? We know it has happened already in the case of certain small communities, but I doubt whether we should pin our hopes for the early salvation of the vast mass of the people on this phenomenon of biology. The reason for doubt is that a mere raising of the general standard of living to a bare minimum would probably stimulate the rate of population increase. We could not look for any automatic decrease until the general living standard began to rise above that minimum.

I realise that in putting forward these views I am on dangerous ground. Most Indians are intensely proud that their country contains one of the greatest aggregates of population on earth. I also realise that, at any rate for the next fifty years, there can be little change in the general outlook, mainly because religious and social custom favours large families. Even the basic social demand that every man should have a male heir if possible, regardless of the number of daughters produced before that ambition is attained, will alone ensure that the population figures expand

rather than contract. Educated men and women of the younger generation, whose families are small, may quarrel with me over the statements I have just made. I beg them to think not of the comparatively prosperous middle class families comfortably housed on the outskirts of Bombay, Calcutta and Madras, but of the villages where the mass of the population lives and where the absence of children in the house means the absence of support for the old age of the present generation.

I do not pretend to know the answers to the problem I have raised and I cannot do more than indicate the size of the task which the Indian birthrate is even today preparing for future generations of her own administrators. I seriously doubt whether any of the solutions so far canvassed—a rising standard of living, birth control, monogamy etc.—can take effect in time. Industrialisation of the country does not seem to be the secret, because however rapidly factories may be built they cannot absorb more than a proportion of the *annual increase*, and they can have no effect at all *on the surplus which already exists.* Since factories produce no food they do not assist the primary task of feeding the population on the produce of the country. They do of course make the goods which can be exchanged for imported food, but on the scale on which Indian economists will have to think in the not far distant future, this proposition of imported food also seems doubtful. So much of the world is already ahead of India, technologically speaking, that the potential of India's exports of manufactured goods is limited, whereas her need for food, on the long-term view, seems unlimited. In any case, one of the main markets for manufactured goods should be India herself. Is India's industrial future to be mortgaged to the maintenance of her most vital need—food ?

Can any entries be made on the other side of the ledger to balance this pessimistic account ? I think we can find a number, though none of them will be short-cuts. There is still a margin for an expansion of

population which the country can adequately support when it is economically developed to a reasonably full extent. That fact earns a certain amount of time in which to get things done. Our aim might be described as population consolidation. There is no question of demanding the deliberate reduction of the population, but if we can reduce *the present rate of increase,* even to some extent, there is just a chance that the economic planners could make India a permanently prosperous country.

Now for the basic facts. The least prosperous population groups are increasing the most rapidly. I refer to the ryot whose present plight makes him believe that he cannot do a great deal to better himself and his family. But it seems to me that once he and his wife realise that they can pull themselves up by their chappal straps they might also begin to think that too many children are a serious handicap.

We shall not achieve anything merely by lecturing them ; but suppose we consolidate the man's landholding ; suppose we carry on land development and reclamation to the point where every ryot has enough land of sufficiently good quality to support himself and his family in modest comfort. Then suppose the law forbids the splitting up of his land among coming generations.

The desire to own land is admitted to be one of the Indian peasant's strongest characteristics. It should be possible to develop out of that desire another equally strong wish : To pass that holding on intact to his heir. The desire to conserve and pass on what one has gained or inherited is in fact a fairly strong human instinct. Once the ryot has been able to gain something, the desire for conservation can be depended upon to assert itself because human beings do not willingly take to a reduced standard of life.

There is reason to suppose that the ryot will react to these conditions in much the same manner as other social groups. He will tend to resist increasing his commitments in such matters as polygamy and the

early marriages of his children. He will in fact reduce the opportunities for the production of more children. And his spontaneous desires on the economic plane will be much more decisive, I believe, than anything the advocates of birth control may be able to do.

It could be argued perhaps that this suggestion amounts to much the same thing as raising the ryot's standard of living. Up to a certain point, that cannot be denied. The difference is that instead of waiting until better living has had its effect on the birthrate, we should stimulate the ryot's desire for stable conditions while the process of improvement is still going on. We shall not obtain magical results, but even a very slow improvement would be better than the present runaway increase in the number of mouths to be fed.

On a pound a head a day basis, the next Census, in 1951, will see India's annual food needs increased by about eight million tons compared with 1941. If the present rate of population growth persists the reader can easily work out for himself the food liabilities to which India is committed by the end of the century. They are double her present day production!

Can such liabilities be met? If the past rate of crop expansion is any criterion, the answer is no. For example, here is a calculation made by Sir Tracy Gavin-Jones, who has spent much time studying the problems of Indian agriculture. He writes:

"The population of India has increased 27 per cent in the last 20 years, that means that about 100 million people more have to be fed. Irrigation has been extended in this period, and there has been a 20 per cent increase in the area of irrigated crops grown, but in spite of this the total area under all crops, including irrigated crops, increased only by 10 per cent. Moreover, although the area under commercial crops, such as jute, cotton, and oil seeds, has increased 17 per cent, and although the area under sugar cane has considerably increased, due to heavy customs duty levied on imported sugar, the total area under food crops has

increased only 1 per cent, against the increased population of 27 per cent."

Of course if may be argued that, given adequate methods, the *yield* from the number of acres already under food could be so increased that no greater area under food would be needed to maintain the extra population. Unfortunately such evidence as we have seems to indicate the opposite tendency; the yield of food crops per acre has certainly not increased to any noticeable extent.

It was therefore all the more unfortunate when many people in India professed to draw great comfort from the series of resolutions passed by the representatives of 44 Governments who met in conference at Hot Springs, Virginia, in May and June 1943. Their manifesto, which amounted to an admission that large sections of the world's population had never been properly fed and that this state of affairs was "justified neither by ignorance nor by the harshness of nature," seems to be regarded as a *mantram* capable of exorcising the whole of India's food problem. There is little need to go into the rest of their findings. Any intelligent person who spent an hour in an average village in any part of the world could have produced much the same conclusions, particularly paragraph four of their "Declaration," which begins with the remarkable statement that "The first cause of hunger and malnutrition is poverty."

However, it would be merely stupid to make sport of their work, the chief value of which was to show that there is little hope of a satisfactory distribution of food in this world without international economic co-operation on an all-embracing scale. When and how that co-operation is to be achieved is another matter, but its arrival will obviously be governed by the political and economic aspirations of the countries of the world, including India. Indeed we have reached a point at which it is permissible to point out that the development of national economic plans, without reference to the rest of the world, may prove a mixed blessing;

the choice between co-operation and starvation is a real one.

Even while her own land development is proceeding, India will have to look to the possibility of importing large quantities of food. Where is it to come from? Before and during the war certain areas of the world raised very large surpluses of food grains which they could export without robbing their own people; for example Australia, Canada, Argentina and the U.S.A. But can we assume that the same conditions will obtain in the post-war period? There is evidence that the position is changing. For example, the U.S.A. which was always regarded as a country with surplus food to sell, has now undertaken food rationing which is not expected to come to an end immediately after the fighting stops. The reasons are the commitments which America has undertaken to feed countries freed from the Axis, and the fall in her farm production owing to the manpower demands of the war effort and the difficulty of producing agricultural equipment under war conditions. Indeed there are observers in the U.S.A. who believe that American farm production has been so reduced that she may not be able to carry out her promises to the people of Europe if present conditions continue.

Similarly, Great Britain, who because of her dependence on imported food must carefully survey future prospects, will not drop rationing as soon as peace returns. That much has been made very clear by Mr. Bevin, who expects coupon rationing to last for four or five years after the war.

Why should such gloomy views be taken in the two countries best qualified to estimate world food resources? There is no mystery about it. The diversion of manpower and equipment from agriculture to the war has gravely reduced production. It cannot be quickly restored until a sufficiently large stock of farm equipment has been manufactured. The Americans, who know most about this side of the business, believe that the world is now so short of farming machinery

that even working flat out, it will take manufacturers years to restore farmers' equipment to pre-war levels.

These views take no account of the devastation which may be inflicted on the land by the retreating enemy, although it is assumed that the populations of occupied countries will have to be supported with food supplied by the United Nations. It is believed that even when an adequate supply of transport is available again, progress in restoring food standards in the importing countries can only be slow.

Let us try to place India in the perspective of these circumstances. It is generally assumed that the Indian war-time food crisis is due to the cutting off of rice supplies from Burma. Can we assume that when the Japanese are driven from that country those supplies will be automatically resumed ? I think it would be rash to do so. Quite apart from the fact that the Japanese are likely to leave Burma in a most unsatisfactory state, thus necessitating at least temporary supplies of food from outside, Burma will need a couple of normal harvests—and perhaps more—before an exportable surplus *begins* to appear. And the beginning will not be at a level of over a million tons a year —the figure of pre-war exports.

As the Japanese are driven eastward, a further group of shortages will have to be met in Indo-China, in China, in the East Indies and even possibly in Japan itself. Note the distinctly tiresome fact that all these shortages mean rice. Probably, like India has already done, they will have to make up the deficiency with wheat. But that again is not so simple because wheat is also one of the grains which will be needed in the West as well. The inference is obvious : the countries with surplus cereals of any description will have their work cut out to prevent the post-war famines which will threaten the freed and deficit areas.

Let us come back to India again. At present we are relying on a certain amount of imported grain, mostly wheat from Australia, to meet our deficiency. What will happen when the shortages in the whole of the

Far East have also to be met, even in part? I think it would be foolish for Indian public opinion to accustom itself to the idea that Australia has a limitless surplus of wheat to which India has a prescriptive right. That idea may very easily prove a fallacy.

In the decade after the peace has been signed and men lay down their arms and return to the fields we shall of course see a considerable improvement in the internal feeding arrangements of the various countries, but are we entitled to assume that the Hot Springs ideals can be carried out in that period? I think not.

We might as well face the prospect that no country in the world can plan its economic future on a foundation of cheap food supplies which may be easily obtained either domestically or from abroad. Owing to the tremendous decline in the world's food stocks during the war, the chances of putting the Hot Springs ideals into practice after the war ends will be much smaller than they would have been in pre-war conditions. We must therefore assume that India will have to share with the other deficiency areas such food as becomes available for export from the surplus countries. Moreover, we must prepare ourselves for the fact that these imported supplies will cost relatively more than they did in pre-war days, when the overstocked position of world grain markets forced prices down to uneconomic levels. In other words, food will no longer be so cheap that it will remain the least important item in the national planner's calculations. As we have noticed, there is also a risk of the industrialisation of India being mortgaged to her food supply, since imports must be paid for with exports.

It may be argued that India's money crops are normally so much in demand in the rest of the world, that it might be worth her while to give up the struggle for home-produced food, concentrate on money crops, and leave food growing to the areas where large-scale agriculture can tackle the job more efficiently. It is an attractive argument, particularly to those people who are more interested in commerce than agricul-

ture. Its weakness is that we cannot be sure that food and money crop prices will maintain their pre-war relationship. World food prices are likely to be relatively higher in the post-war period; can we assume that cotton, jute, oilseeds and tobacco prices will go the same way ? Frankly I doubt it, because the general trend of world agriculture is to diversify production wherever possible and to meet local needs on the spot. For example, the day when America and India were the only two cotton producing countries of any account is passing.

We should not forget that India represents about a quarter of the world's population. Therefore even if India could afford to buy a large proportion of her food overseas at present rates (a very doubtful proposition), there is no certainty that such a huge demand could be met. While war lasts, India remains in a very strong creditor position internationally, but India also has so much development to undertake to improve the lot of her people, that her role as creditor may not last long. Indeed, the makers of the Bombay Plan for Economic Development expect her to spend not only her present credits but also to raise considerable international loans. Under anything approaching those circumstances the notion that India's population could be supported by imported food is the purest folly.

CHAPTER XX
YOU CAN'T EAT SLOGANS

Perhaps the truest thing ever said about the Bengal famine was a war correspondent's remark that the people of that province were mentally unprepared to cope with their feeding problem. Anyone who was on the spot will understand what he meant. The administration went through the motions of imposing control; the opposition raised a violent storm about it, but neither administration, opposition nor public had made up their minds that food control must be car-

ried through. The measures were a nuisance, to be avoided in practice as far as possible, though useful as political ammunition.

On the all-India scale, much the same type of mentality still exists over long-range food problems. The people and their leaders are not yet mentally prepared to be practical about the business; it is so much easier to think in slogans, political slogans.

I wish I could remember all the more popular slogans circulated since I first came to the country. I doubt if anyone will contradict me if I claim that their practical effect has been nil. A few political propaganda experts may say that their catch phrases have helped to condition the public mind to such things as the demand for independence, Pakistan, etc. Since these are political doctrines, rather than economic entities, I still think the remark that heads this chapter is correct—"You Can't Eat Slogans." Indeed one might go further and say "You Can't Eat Political Doctrine," but it sounds a bit awkward as a slogan!

Perhaps I should make myself clearer. I do not intend to criticise Indian aspirations to independence or any other political doctrine they may care to develop. Politics, as such, is entirely outside my present sphere. I am merely concerned with the fact that concentration on politics, to the exclusion of almost all else, is already having a bad effect on the economic life of the country. The political enthusiast may reply that it is better to be free though starving than to be well fed and enslaved. True, but even the most rabid politician will agree that, other circumstances being equal, it is better to be well fed anyway.

It is possible to over-concentrate attention on one subject, leaving the public completely unprepared for equally urgent affairs. One of the most urgent of these is the business of giving the people enough to eat. Nor is it a problem which will be dissipated by the formation of a National Government or any other form of administration. As experience in India has proved, the provision of food has little relation to the

outward forms of the administration of the day. But it has everything to do with the administration's capacity to achieve results, whatever its form may be. The public's confidence is earned by results, not by appearances and formulas, it has been proved.

These remarks may seem beneath the dignity of experienced dealers in political dogma, but their truth cannot be denied and a moment's consideration should satisfy all but those who are politically over-stimulated that a serious approach to India's more pressing practical problems is long overdue. It is all very well to say that the Bengal famine was the fault of the Governments of India and Great Britain, neither of which theoretically enjoys the confidence of the Indian people. It is not the fault of these Governments, however, that on the average the people of India are so lacking in an understanding of every day economics that, given the opportunity, they would play straight into the hands of unscrupulous market manipulators to produce a Bengal in every district. Nor is it the fault of Governments that even the very people to be protected often join with zest in the silly game of trying to make perfectly wholesome regulations unworkable. Their excuse is that such and such a regulation may cause some-one some hardship, that it is a bit late in the day, that there may be a loophole, or that it may be inconvenient to obey it. When in that frame of mind they blissfully ignore the fact that unless that regulation operates they and their families may be unable to buy food next week.

A section of the community has been so indoctrinated with the twin ideas that if anything goes wrong it is Government's fault and that whatever Government does is wrong, that it is today almost incapable of helping itself in matters with which the administration should be only remotely concerned. Since food control became at all effective, a new slogan to the effect that the public "must be taken into confidence" has appeared. Such a slogan does not mean a thing. The real concern of the public with food is to

obtain enough to eat and to be informed precisely how and where to get it. Telling people of the day to day worries of the food administration and its advisers will not help at all; it may create quite unnecessary alarm and may even damage the public's own interests by giving valuable tips to black market racketeers!

The idea of giving public and government separate identities and setting them up in opposition to each other is a foolish one, which may yet prove a boomerang. Nor has such a policy been intelligently carried out. The average man-in-the-street in India today is probably a great deal less well informed about his country's position *viz-a-viz* the rest of the world, than his grandfather was forty years ago. There is today in India a staggering amount of wishful thinking which has been stimulated by political propaganda. Periodically some hard fact breaks through this haze and the delusion is momentarily cleared, only to be replaced by bitter disappointment and frustration because events have made it plain that facts may be at variance with political dogma. Unfortunately the haze of wishful thinking quickly closes in again and the men who should be thinking constructively return to dreams which are not of this mundane world.

Such a state of affairs is tragic because unless India does some hard thinking and acting, not on the political plane, but on the humdrum plane of raising enough to eat, she is going to find herself dependent on the other farming countries—most of which are in the British Commonwealth—for an increasingly large amount of food every year. That is just one of those unpalatable economic facts which no political leader can destroy, however clever his slogans.

I have touched on the political field to this extent because it is evident that before Indian thought can direct itself fruitfully to the solution of India's most pressing problems we shall have to cut through the mesh of words which has been woven in the past 40 years. For example, a deliberate attempt has been made to establish the fiction that India is economic-

ally enslaved. This propaganda line is likely to rebound on its makers because, whatever may be the case in politics, it is utterly false in economics, and consequently even highly intelligent men and women have come to believe they are slaves when they are in fact free. Such a state of mind must of necessity have a retarding effect on the country's development.

Since the Central and Provincial Governments got down to the job of insisting that more food be grown, the "slavery" tale has reappeared in new guise The argument now runs that Delhi and London will concentrate on Indian agriculture in order to side-track Indian industry. In other words, Government's action, even when attempting to improve the food supply, is reprehensible.

A great deal of this propaganda has emanated from Congress quarters and there can be little argument that Congress have failed badly in the economic field. Their defence that Indian industry has been suppressed by the British for the sake of their own manufacturers and that Indian exports are so directed that London takes the advantage, is of course totally untrue.

It is no business of mine if propagandists prefer picturesque falsehoods to the truth, except to point out that the effect of telling a somewhat inert people that they are not free to get on with the job of developing their country is liable to be disastrous. For example, the canard that Indian industries are suppressed for the benefit of Britain. The existence of such great industrial houses as the Tatas, Birlas, Dalmias, Mehtas and Modys, and the powerful industrial groups of Ahmedabad, Cawnpore, the Punjab, Bengal and Madras, prove that where Indians have cared to tackle modern industries, nothing has prevented them from setting up their factories, exploiting their mines and power schemes, and developing their banks and insurance companies. To a preponderating degree the economy of India is today in the hands of Indian industrialists and businessmen

drawn from all communities. The system of Government has not had anything to do with the case. For example, if London was really determined to protect the interests of Lancashire why was the huge Indian textile industry able to grow up and be given the protection of tariffs?

My reason for pointing out such fallacies is simply to indicate that by propagating them Congress have done Indian nationalism a bad turn in the economic sphere. Initiative has been discouraged. Indeed it might be claimed that Mr. Gandhi's only contribution to Indian economics has been *Khadi* which, had it been of any great importance, would have alienated his supporters among the textile magnates. Had Congress organised a really sound better-life movement in the villages—Mr. Gandhi recognised the importance of raising the standard of living—they would have had a first class economic achievement to their credit. As it was, they merely followed the official village uplift movement which was badly based because it did not concentrate on the central problem: the relief of rural poverty.

With a man of Mr. Gandhi's prestige at the head of affairs and with their grip on the main mass of the mercantile element in the country, Congress organisers could have done much to raise living standards by merely insisting that the agriculturist obtained a better share of the price of his produce. Moreover, if they possessed the confidence of the people, as they claimed, they could have produced results comparatively quickly, thus giving a practical demonstration of the type of miracle which they nowadays claim will come to pass when their version of popular government is set up.

The plain fact is that the donkey work of reorganising rural economy did not appeal to the average politician, and Mr. Gandhi has had several occasions to rebuke his followers for failure and lack of enthusiasm in the villages. It is, after all, so much easier to hold meetings and make impassioned speeches. But meetings and speeches and slogans will not feed the people.

No amount of popular Government will fill the grain shops if the crops are not in the fields. Some one has got to convince the farmers and the middlemen-moneylenders of India that bigger crops and narrower margins between growers' and consumers' prices are today an urgent necessity. But it will not be done merely by shouting slogans—as Delhi and the provincial governments have already discovered!

CHAPTER XXI
TARGET FOR THIS GENERATION

In modern Indian verse there is a convention glorifying the mud hut. It represents the simple beauty and also the suffering of village life. It is the hearth of the countryside, the home of the starving millions. The mud hut is in fact many things to many people. Those who like mud huts best usually live in comfortable flats in the larger cities; except Mr. Gandhi who developed his own special version of this form of dwelling for the definite purpose of drawing attention to the countryside and its mode of life. I doubt if he welcomed the uncritical admiration all mud huts received at the hands of his less practical followers, just because he went to live in one!

To a generation which would build a better India, the mud hut is really a symbol not of the glorious race, but of poverty, dirt, disease and ignorance, the four greatest evils which India has to combat. The sooner silly praise of the mud hut is forgotten and the country's attention fixed on pucca dwellings which are light enough and clean enough for good health, the better. To the rising generation the mud hut should be a symbol of the bad old days.

Better housing may seem to have little to do with our special subject of food; but the underlying motives are the same: a better standard of living and a determination to achieve it. Contentment in a mud hut is

synonymous with poor food and the acceptance of epidemics as acts of God instead of the results of man's disregard of elementary hygiene; with toil in the fields which brings an unnecessarily poor return; with a resignation which would be stupid in any community with its wits about it. All of which brings us round again to our early contentions that the Indian countryside is capable of being made a great deal more fertile than it is at present; and that this change must be made if the mass of the people are to have enough to eat. There are many isolated cases to prove what can be done; there is a great deal of land awaiting development, and plenty of capital can be made available for the job.

The main factors that are missing are a coherent plan of countrywide development and a pioneering spirit. So far as plans are concerned, I think most of us will agree with Mr. Churchill that it is futile to do nothing while planning to do everything. For the vast majority of agricultural matters it is sufficient if plans are provincewide to begin with, except perhaps in the case of large hydro-electric and irrigation projects both of which should be on a regional basis. We must, however, escape from the delusion that when our plans have been made the job is done. It isn't!

Plan making arouses much enthusiasm in India, and all communities—including the I.C.S.—join in with equal zest. The trouble is that when the dust of controversy has died down, either no action is taken or else everyone has become so confused that the worst possible plan is adopted! I do not deny the necessity of a well considered plan, but just as important are a properly trained staff, sufficient funds and the executive determination to carry through the work.

As for the pioneering spirit, we need a dose of it not only in official Agricultural and Revenue Departments but among the leaders of our rural communities. At present far too many landlords' sons plan their careers with one eye on a flat in Bombay, because it is not fashionable to live in the country. At present, it

is true, rural life is not as comfortable as the town variety. It could be made so, if the people concerned were prepared to go and do it. To be perfectly candid, the present generation is much too fond of its own comfort and the next generation is being trained to believe that the modern conveniences of town life belong to it by right. That is the sheerest folly. An educated, progressive, rural middle class is a prime necessity to bring new ideas into farming. As yet that link, vital to farming progress, is missing. Concerning the lack of an educated class in the Indian village Sir John Russell writes:

> "Perhaps the most serious of all the difficulties confronting Indian agriculture is the lack of an agricultural aristocracy and of an educated agricultural middle class. Many of the great advances in Western agriculture are due to men of this type: highly competent agriculturists, rooted in the soil, with a thorough knowledge of crops and livestock and a shrewd idea of how to get the most out of their land. It is quite certain that without them the West would have been in a far poorer position than it now holds. In Great Britain an improvement effected in the experiment stations can be at once put out into practice: some large farmer is prepared to try it at his own expense as soon as he is satisfied as to its value, and he almost invariably finds some simpler or better way of using it. But these good farmers also themselves devise improvements, which are sometimes better than those of the experiment stations. Indeed the experiment stations think themselves fortunate if they can obtain yields as good as those of the best farmers, and their best hopes of success are to overcome some special difficulty or to develop alternative methods of achieving some desired end. The staffs of the experiment stations are compelled to keep in touch with practical men or they would find themselves outclassed in the struggle for agricultural improvement.
>
> "The existence of this educated class gives a social attractiveness to life in the country.

"Unfortunately India has nothing corresponding with the educated class. The landowners are largely town dwellers and many of those who reside in the villages are not themselves farming on any important scale. There are of course exceptions: I met some enterprising large farmers and energetic zemindars who were practising agriculture well and serving as models for the surrounding cultivators. Men of this kind deserve commendation and recognition and efforts should be made to increase their number.

"Equally important is the need for increasing the number of educated farmers. It is unfortunate that the colleges have been able to do so little in this direction. Perhaps the greatest difference between the agricultural colleges in India and those of the West is that most of the western students go back to the land to do practical farming while the Indian agricultural graduates seek some non-practical post, where their influence on practical farming is very small. An old Hindu proverb states that agriculture is the best life and service the worst: the modern tendency is to reverse this and to rank Government service as the best life and agriculture as the worst. This explains the relatively small effects exerted by the Indian colleges on the cultivator's practice."

Can this gap be filled? Encouraging progress in settling educated men on the land has been made in the Punjab, Mysore and Travancore, while experiments of a somewhat different type have been made in Sind. The Punjab experiment started in 1932 when two villages in one of the canal irrigated tracts were colonised entirely by college graduates—48 of them. Each man received two squares (55 acres) of canal irrigated land. Conditions of occupancy were that the tenant must live permanently on the land and must build on it a house to the satisfaction of the local collector. The tenant had to cultivate the whole of the land with his own hands, though he could employ paid labour to assist him. If after five years all the conditions had been satisfactorily fulfilled the tenant was

granted occupancy rights, but not proprietory rights. On the occupant's death the tenancy might be continued by his eldest son. During the first two harvests practically all the rates and taxes were remitted.

The conditions were not ideal for attracting colonists in large numbers, but for their purpose the Punjab authorities needed a substantial type of young citizen who was prepared to take a keen interest in his farm.

As an experiment it was interesting and, I understand, has proved successful. In 1937 two more "collegiate villages" were started with 41 young graduates. No doubt the idea of this concentration of young men of the same class was to prevent them feeling isolated and lonely. The weakness was that it did not spread the educated type widely enough. This has been overcome by settling educated men at the rate of a pair to a village, thus providing diffusion without loneliness.

Naturally graduates who had specialised in agriculture made the best showing, as was to be expected. But arts and science men who had the wisdom to copy them produced results which compared favourably. Some of the settlers' farms have developed into outstanding successes, with record yields of wheat and cotton. Thus on a small scale Sir John Russell's ideal is being achieved.

A similar diffusion of educated talent in the more closely settled provinces is not so easy, though post-war land development schemes should provide an opportunity for introducing educated people into the farming community. Otherwise, much more propaganda should be carried on to induce the heirs to substantial holdings to take their education back to the land rather than to waste it in the law courts.

Another potentially valuable group are ex-soldiers, particularly the many educated men who have joined the forces in this war. Agricultural courses given before demobilisation and attractive terms for settlement on new land, or for developing the land their families

already own, might well attract men who have broken away from the attractions of city life.

The idea of a satisfactory life being possible without cinemas, restaurants and clubs may surprise the average educated young Indian who has been brought up to put the so-called "intellectual life" before all else. He should not, however, forget that at least as much mental ingenuity may be required to master a diseased field as to keep a ledger and spend one's spare time at the cinema. Far too much of the urban intellectual life seems to lead to frustration and not satisfaction. Agriculture, properly undertaken, has the advantage of showing very clear results. The best field of rice in the taluqa provides its owner with at least as much solid satisfaction as the possession of a shiny new car gives the town dweller.

It would be foolish to assume, however, that a man with a limited amount of money can settle in an isolated part of the country and without any assistance convert it into a heaven on earth in a short time. Only in certain areas is such individual development possible. In most districts Government can and must provide certain facilities. Perhaps the chief of them is roads, because in an isolated area only subsistence farming is possible since lack of transport makes it impossible to market surpluses at a profit. In most parts of the country irrigation is essential to make surplus farming profitable. A private individual can dig wells and install his own pumps if conditions are suitable, but in the main irrigation, like roads, requires governmental development. Electricity is an important adjunct of modern farming and housekeeping. There is practically no reason, except the old convention that Government must make money out of all it touches, why electric power should not become available on a large scale.

On a smaller scale, but often beyond the power of an individual, are such community schemes as drinking water supplies, sanitation and, where necessary, land drainage. Modern agricultural students would

probably expect the State to supply seed, manure, improved livestock, implements and so on. They might also expect fuel and grazing facilities. Whether such services are really needed or whether they amount to coddling the farmer will depend on the condition of each district.

The needs of the very small tenant farmer are a different matter. He rarely possesses the resources to start helping himself. Moreover, as most tenancy arrangements stand at present an unfair proportion of the results of his enterprise are likely to be pocketed by his landlord. Indeed, in addition to surplus mouths among the poorest people, there are many areas where the absentee or idle landlord bears much too heavily on the land. In some areas there has grown up a ridiculous convention that it is below a landholder's dignity to work in his own fields, however poor he may be. It is hardly surprising that zamindars as a class have come to be regarded with suspicion and even hostility. Nor, considering the poor service the average Indian landlord renders to the community and the condition of his estate, is this attitude entirely unjustified.

Some progress is being made, particularly in certain schools run by Indian States, in training landlords' sons to take their place in the van of agricultural progress. In British India, however, far too many landholding families are able to send their children to city schools where they soon learn to despise rural life. As a result, too much rural finance is thrown away on producing another unsuccessful young pleader who augments the pittance from his practice with doles wrung out of his father's tenants. Had he been started off in the right direction when he first went to school, he would today be leading them in the fields, to their mutual benefit.

Yet it would be a major tragedy of Indian life if the rural landlord as a class were extirpated. Could they be trained to undertake their responsibilities they would be the most powerful factor in rural regenera-

tion, transcending anything the most progressive agricultural department could do. The reason for this view is the enormous importance of the personal touch in Indian relationships—especially in the case of peasants. Officials who are trusted can perform near-miracles, but the real miracles are wrought by the man who has grown up with his people. Officials change, the landlord does not. Tenants may think the progressive son of the house is mad but they will often do his will because they admired his reprobate old father for his skill in horsemanship or something equally irrelevant.

These are relationships which no official organisation can ever achieve, but it is the function of good government to turn them to the advantage of the whole community—first by training the rising generation of landlords for their true work, and secondly by making the conditions of landlordism such that he who enjoys the fruits of the land must take his part in producing them.

The whole of India's arable land is not of course controlled by landlords. In the areas where ryots hold their land directly from Government there is just as much to be done. The most important feature is fragmentation of the land into holdings which are uneconomically small. Many good intentions have been expressed and laws have even been passed, but the amount of actual progress made in the villages is ridiculously small compared with the total area involved. Government, just as much as the zamindars, need to pull up their socks.

Similarly, the business of debt relief and settlement has been tackled in most lackadaisical fashion. Laws have been passed, progress has been made in some areas, but it needed a world war and boom prices to prevent large areas of India from collapsing under an astronomical number of crores of indebtedness.

For debt I think a new approach is required. By all means carry on—but much more vigorously—the present policy of making the rural moneylender keep

within reasonable limits. At the same time we must tackle the basic causes of indebtedness. So far the official attitude has been the comfortable one of saying that the villager is improvident; that his social events like weddings and funeral cost him too much in proportion to his earnings. So they do—or rather they would do if he also spent the same amount of money as his town brother on his pleasures from month to month.

The official, sure of his monthly pay—and his pension—whatever the condition of the harvest in the districts which support him, does not seem to realise that the cultivator's annual income is controlled not by Government but by the weather. The village bania performs a service—for which he often takes too great a reward—by helping the cultivator to smooth out these variations.

When, however, whole areas become permanently involved in debt it is no longer possible to explain it away on the score of improvidence; instead, there must be something radically wrong with the economic set-up of the area. Such maladjustment requires investigation and correction. Since income is not balancing liabilities, either the liabilities are too high or the income too low. Usually both conditions exist. Debt settlement may reduce part of the liability, though it will not remove it and is not a permanent cure, save in exceptional circumstances. The other important liabilities are taxation, rents, and the cost of manufactured goods. Since the rate at which land revenue is charged is supposed to have some relation to the value of the crop raised on the land, there does not appear to be any sound reason which it should not be assessed like any other tax on income from a productive pursuit; that is, on net income. For example, if I manufacture a million watches with a market value of ten rupees each, my factory's operations are not taxed on a figure of ten million rupees, but on the sum left after I have paid all the costs of my production, which may leave only a million rupees.

Land revenue officials approach the problem differently and explain that their demand is the smallest of all the charges the cultivator has to pay. They ask: "What is a rupee an acre tax if the crop is worth Rs. 50 an acre?" True, it would be small if the *net* profit were Rs. 50. But if it is actually only Rs. 6, as it often was before the war, the land revenue demand assumes a very different significance. I would like to see the behaviour of chambers of commerce if the Finance Member applied Revenue Department principles to member firms' income-tax!

Since rents are usually a share of the crop their incidence fits more closely into the agricultural rhythm, but there is plenty of room for legislation to tighten up the landlord's responsibilities and enforce his observance of them. As for the cost of manufactured needs, the Indian peasant is still in the disadvantageous position of all farmers who have not organised themselves on a co-operative basis. That is to say, he still has to sell wholesale and buy retail and the gulf between these two market levels is apt to be a wide one, particularly in India.

Thus apart from the practical work in the fields, this generation has in the sphere of food production a number of targets which are mainly financial. There are: the problem of indebtedness which is more a symptom of unsatisfactory rural finance than a separate disease; the problem of Government levies which ought to be related to the services rendered to the rural community; a more progressive system of public finance so that rural development does not depend simply on small savings from revenue; and approaching the farmer more personally, the development of co-operative sale and purchase organisations and regulated markets so that he may receive a reasonable share of the value of his crop.

In the past two decades the rapid increase in rural indebtedness proved clearly that Indian farming was being carried on below subsistence level. In the system of finance to which he had been committed the Indian

farmer could not balance his accounts. In a country which depends almost entirely on its agriculture that was a scandalous state of affairs. The war boom has lifted many farmers above subsistence level, thus completely dislocating the state of affairs which had mistakenly been regarded as normal before 1939.

If the position is allowed to deteriorate when the war ends cheap food may for a time be available, but the drift towards insolvency will be rapid and it does not need much intelligence to realise that a bankrupt countryside is the worst possible setting in which to increase agricultural productivity. The economic status of the Indian farmer is the keystone of the country's future plans. It is therefore our principal target.

CHAPTER XXII
PLAN OF CAMPAIGN

In the last chapter I tried to indicate some of the present circumstances which require adjustment—or abolition—and the targets at which we should aim in order to increase India's agricultural production. What are the prospects?

First of all, the potential resources: Quantity and quality of the land; crop yield possibilities; standard of agricultural practice, and availability of such aids as irrigation, manures and tools. Land area is at the moment the least of our problems. There is still a vast quantity which could be cultivated, but isn't (150 million acres of "culturable waste" compared with 267 million acres ploughed annually in British India). Quality is variable, but in districts with long histories of cultivation there appears to be a permanent though low level of fertility. Practically all India's arable land has been found to be capable of great and rapid improvement.

As for crops, we have already noticed that India holds most of the records for the lowest yield per acre. On the other hand, the seed experts have produced new varieties of most crops which show improvements in yield of anything up to 100 per cent. That should be good enough to start with. Agricultural practice is of course capable of improvement, but the extent of these improvements is to a great degree controlled by such related factors as consolidation of land holdings to permit the use of more machinery, the provision of irrigation, manure etc. In the circumstances already existing it may be said that the Indian farmer's methods will produce a crop for an outlay which a poverty-stricken peasant can afford.

In the drier areas the cultivator requires training in dry farming technique, which is mainly concerned with making the most of a scanty and unreliable rainfall and is of course closely related to contour bunding. We could if we wished look further ahead into such matters as contour trenching by the Forest Department in hilly country and into afforestation, technique which when fully developed may well arrest the desiccation of large areas of the country.

Irrigation serves only about 52 million out of the 267 million acres cropped each year in British India. That is to say, there are facilities for giving only one-fifth of the year's crops the benefit of extra water which may be required to bring them to maximum bearing. This lack of water has a two-fold effect. On the one hand, four-fifths of the crops are at the mercy of the monsoon which may fail even in the wettest districts. On the other, there are large areas where only one crop—the monsoon crop—can be raised. Irrigation would enable this land to be double and even treble cropped, other factors such as soil fertility being equal to the task. Even then we have not taken into account large areas of "culturable waste" where no satisfactory crop can be grown at all until wells or irrigation canals are dug.

Manure deserves a book to itself. Let us content ourselves for the moment with the fact that even a

little manure will produce phenomenal improvements. At present much animal manure is burnt or wasted; green manuring is little practised, and artificial and oil cake manures are only used in special areas.

What other ingredients do we need to put Indian agricultural production on a level with the rest of the world? The answer is little but the will to get on with the job. We do not need to wait until India has been planned to the last acre. For example, the Indian sugar crop and the large industry which has developed out it are not the results of elaborate planning. Once a number of remarkable improvements in the yield of Indian sugar cane had been made, and Indian sugar makers were given a protective tariff against foreign competitors, the industry ran ahead. Indian cane yields per acre are on the average still low compared with most cane growing countries, but sugar is one of the most advanced branches of Indian agriculture, and judging by results obtained in certain areas, there seems little doubt that yields will improve generally. At any rate, even today the Indian sugar cane grower is comparatively prosperous.

However, sugar is a less vital food crop than the cereals—rice, wheat, millet and maize. Why cannot they go ahead in the same way? The truth is that they can, if the grower can afford to give them the same favourable treatment as sugar receives. But he obviously cannot make this outlay if the value of cereal crops is to return to levels as low as those of the past couple of decades. (I exclude the boom years since 1941 from the reckoning).

A study of incomes from farming in a cereal growing area, published in *Indian Farming* late in 1943, showed astonishing results. Details were given of the net income per acre obtained by a landlord from a number of different farms in a canal irrigated area of north-western India during the 13 years, 1930-31 to 1942-43. The cultivation was of a high standard and was done entirely by tenants farming under half-*batai* conditions, " i.e., the landlord provides the land; land-

lord and tenant both contribute to the cost of the cultivation, the contribution being much greater in the case of the tenant than of the landlord; and landlord and tenant share the produce of each crop in equal proportions. On these farms cultivation was done according to the best practices. Yields, though not better than those obtained on well farmed estates, were generally above those got by the average landowner who did not make use of all the profitable results of agricultural research."

Commenting on the financial results, the writer says: " The figures represent the net income of the landlord only, after deducting the cost of management and other expenses incurred by him. They do not include the income which the other half of the produce provided to the tenant in return for his labour, nor has any deduction been made for interest on the capital invested in the land by the landlord." The farms paid no land revenue and the irrigation charges were borne by the tenant. These charges are normally shared in equal proportions and the fact that the tenants paid the whole of the irrigation charges lowered the landlord's expenses by about Rs. 3-8 per acre.

In 1930-31 the average income received by the landlord from each acre was Rs. 7-5-9 and in 1931-32 Rs. 6-13-2. From that year it climbed gradually to Rs. 14-15-6 in 1940-41, Rs. 21-11-7 in the following year and Rs. 60-5-9 in 1942-42! The income to the tenant would be about Rs. 7 an acre less. The main points to be noticed in these statistics are that in the early thirties there was practically no income at all from agriculture; that from 1937 to 1940 incomes remained stable at about double the depression figure, and finally the extraordinary change which the present boom has brought about. Of course it is necessary to offset against this good fortune the rise in the farmer's own cost of living during the boom period.

The figures are also interesting from the all-India aspect because although they show the best that could be done under the most favourable conditions, it is easy

to see how less fortunate farmers could not afford to be progressive, and why for so many years they did not even clear their cost of production including rents and taxes. On the other hand, it is equally clear that given anything like favourable market conditions, there is money in food growing. Between 1940-41 and 1942-43 incomes increased fourfold. In the same period the price of wheat rose from about Rs. 4 a maund to around Rs. 10—an increase of only 150 per cent. It is also evident that wholesale grain prices could drop back a little and still leave the grower a substantial profit. But a reduction to pre-war levels does not seem to be either economically desirable or necessary. Food was, in fact, too cheap.

Control to ensure that the middleman's profit margin is pegged at a reasonable figure seems as though it will be essential if the development of agricultural prosperity is to be any better than a hit and miss business. This need may be summed up in the word " security " and of it Sir Jogendra Singh, Member for the Education, Health and Lands Department, said, " The principal security problem—and in many ways it is the crux of the whole problem—is that of prices for agricultural produce; to ensure for the cultivator some level (in relation to the general cost of living) below which prices will not be allowed to fall in peacetime; something perhaps on the lines of the ' ever-normal granary ' proposal which has received so much attention in the U.S.A. and in England. Under such a system a surplus over normal would be stored against the eventuality of a lean year and prices would thereby be maintained in a bumper year (by the taking of as much as was necessary off the market for storage) and would be kept down in years of shortage......It is little use giving the cultivator improved seed, cheap manure and plentiful water if when a bumper crop matures, he has to sell his crop at a price which leaves him with less margin to meet his own purchases than he enjoyed before."

I have little doubt that if the farmer can be reasonably sure of a satisfactory return for his labour, the

expansion of food production will receive the greatest stimulus it can have: that of self-interest, the main-spring of all human endeavour. What other assistance does the farmer need?

He needs implements and working cattle to enable him to get on with the job. Good varieties of both tools and cattle are being produced nowadays in India and a robust agriculture will provide a strong demand for them. After the war the Indian iron and steel industry should be able to do much for the Indian countryside.

The production of chemical fertilisers is another way in which large scale industry can aid food production. During 1943 the Food Grains Policy Committee recommended the production in India of at least 350,000 tons of sulphate of ammonia a year. The Government of India later announced that they were considering the setting up of factories to make this fertiliser in various parts of the country.

At present Indian production of sulphate of ammonia is about 26,000 tons a year—a minute proportion of the country's real needs. These were placed at a million tons a year by a conference of experts who met in Delhi to implement the Food Grain Policy Committee's recommendations. The main difficulty is to secure the plant; raw materials in the form of gypsum and the by-products of coal, are already available. In view of the smallness of India's coal reserves, it might be advisable to avoid processes requiring too much coal. Fixation of nitrogen from the air offers one alternative, while in Travancore an ingenious scheme for using the plentiful charcoal provided by the State's jungles has been evolved. If production on a large scale is undertaken it is expected that the cost of Indian-made sulphate of ammonia will be from Rs. 22 to Rs. 39 a ton, as compared with the pre-war price of Rs. 90 to Rs. 100 for the imported product. It will thus come within the reach of most Indian farmers.

Before we jump to the conclusion that Delhi has only to provide unlimited quantities of sulphate of ammonia

to solve everyone's problems, one or two aspects of land fertilisation should be explained. The soil is a living thing and its fertility is dependent on the return to it of the by-products of the vegetation which it provides. These by-products may be in the form of animal manure, decaying vegetable matter, oilcake, bonemeal or, as a substitute for some of these, artificial manures.

Natural manures remain effective as fertilising agents for a considerable time; they develop what is known as " humus " in the soil and enable it to hold the moisture necessary for satisfactory crop raising. Unless this physical condition is present in the soil, neither the finest seeds, the newest techniques, nor the most powerful chemical manures will produce heavy crops.

On the other hand, artificial manures are chemicals pure and simple; they add no humus to the soil and their effect, if spectacular, is usually temporary in the extreme. Applied without other manures, they stimulate the crop and exhaust the soil. Sulphate of ammonia is emphatically not to be regarded as the magic means of filling bellies. Used in conjunction with other manures, however, it is very valuable and can produce remarkable increases in the weight of cereal crops. In Madras, for example, rice yields comparable with those prevailing in foreign countries can be obtained by resorting to intensive manurial practice.

By far the most important soil fertiliser is still ordinary farmyard manure, little of which finds its way into Indian fields. The main reason for this absence is its use as fuel in the vast majority of village households which have nothing else to burn. Early in 1944, Sir Jogendra Singh proposed to overcome this difficulty by the development of village forests to supply domestic fuel, thus releasing cowdung for its proper purpose—the manuring of the land. According to him, 250 million tons of cowdung could be made available to manure 72 million acres or 30 per cent of all India's sown area. The effect of such manure would be to double crop yields (he instanced a well manured

Punjab farm which gave 50 maunds of wheat to the acre—four times the Indian average). Altogether, he considered that the return of farmyard manure to the land would increase food supplies by 50 per cent.

Another line of approach to more fertile soils is through India's huge crops of oilseeds and groundnuts. The "cake," left after the extraction of the oil, is an excellent cattle food (especially in the case of groundnut) and a good nitrogenous manure which adds much body to the soil and has remarkable effects on both rice and sugar cane crops. Before the war very little of this cake found its way back to the fields in India because most of her vegetable oil exports were in the form of uncrushed seeds. Today, when there are few oilseed exports, the use of the cake as a manure is increasing, and several provinces, notably Madras, have taken steps to subsidise its use. In Madras measures have also been taken to control supplies, and when international trade reopens again it would be a valuable safeguard for Indian soil fertility if it were made compulsory for all oilseeds to be crushed in the country and only the oil exported. It is the oil, incidentally, which our overseas customers mainly require.

If the soil can be made sufficiently fertile it will be possible to introduce several important changes in Indian farming technique. For example, it will no longer be necessary to leave fields lying fallow in order that they may recover after bearing a crop. The introduction of scientific manuring and crop rotation has made fallowing unnecessary in western Europe and the same thing can be done here. It would mean the permanent addition of 100 million acres to the area cropped annually. Furthermore, given sufficient manure and water, most Indian fields would carry more than one crop a year. At present only a small proportion of them do so.

Double and treble cropping depends on extra manure and water, and although it has been customary for agricultural departments and economists to point out that the monsoon is strong enough in wide areas of

India for there to be little risk of crop failure, it is also increasingly apparent that irrigation on a fairly general scale would be well worth while. True, water cannot be provided in all circumstances, but recent investigations suggest that only a small proportion of the possible area has actually been developed. Countless excellent schemes have been lying in pigeon-holes for generations—it is time they were brought out—*and used.*

A fresh impetus was given to whole business of irrigation in 1943 when Sir William Stampe, who had been responsible for introducing tube well irrigation in the United Provinces, was appointed Irrigation Adviser to the Government of India in order to speed up irrigation development as much as possible to help the "Grow More Food" campaign. He divided irrigation programmes into three groups. The first were small schemes which would enable new crops to be sown within a year of the undertaking being sanctioned. Principally these were tube wells and water lifts on river banks, but they included small dams across nullas, extensions of existing canal schemes, etc. Second came the schemes which could give results in two to three years, and finally the long-term schemes—barrages etc.—which would only reach completion in the immediate post-war period but which should form part of present policy. The three groups were not regarded as separate, but as an orderly series of developments.

Wells of course involve pumps and the means of powering them. Such equipment is by no means easy to obtain in wartime, but it is well worth an effort when it is remembered that the average power-pumped tube well can water 300 acres of wheat and other winter crops and 150 acres of pre-monsoon crops. Already there are some 20,000 pumps in the Ganges valley, with plenty of room for more. In the Punjab 276 pumps are being installed and the water from them will be capable of producing an extra 80,000 tons of winter food crops alone, or enough to feed the

whole of Lahore for nearly a year. Motor pumps are also being installed in Bihar and Baroda, plus river pumps in Bengal. All told, the schemes in hand early in 1944 represented 180,000 tons of extra food grains a year or 30 full shiploads—an argument which, according to Sir William Stampe, was conclusive in securing manufacture and shipping facilities at a critical time of the war.

Tube well pumps are usually powered by electric or diesel motors, and the development of an electric grid system, one of Delhi's post-war schemes, will help greatly to develop this type of irrigation. In the meantime a good deal can be done by using diesel engines.

Conversely, there are tracts of very valuable agricultural country where power facilities are needed to de-water millions of acres of waterlogged land. It is not perhaps generally realised that the Punjab alone is losing 50,000 acres of cultivation every year from this cause, and that large scale drainage in Bihar would add ten per cent or more to the rice growing area of the province.

Apart from accelerating the use of irrigation wherever possible, Sir William Stampe has worked hard on two more aspects of this branch of agriculture. One is the development of irrigation and hydro-electric power on regional rather than provincial lines. This change in outlook is now beginning to take effect, especially on the borders of the Punjab and the United Provinces where the two administrations are working on a common scheme. By contrast, the crying scandal of the Ceded Districts' struggle for existence is due mainly to the inability of the Madras and Hyderabad Governments to agree on irrigation schemes from the Tungabadhra river—schemes which ought to have been carried out 40 years ago.

Sir William's second proposition is the development of electric power for rural use from the falls on the upper reaches of irrigation canals.

The most serious problem to be overcome in all these developments—apart from preliminary inertia—

is the low standard of mechanical skill in the Indian village. No doubt as the tube wells become more popular the Indian pump manufacturer will claim his place in the sun. He will need to remember, however, that his products must be maintained at a consistently high standard. Unreliable pumps ruin crops and may be worse than no pumps at all. Similarly the men responsible for maintaining such machinery in running order on the spot will need to appreciate the importance of their job. Skill and conscientiousness will have to be above the standards observed by the average pre-war mechanic. There can be no hit and miss business over services on which the life of the community depends.

CHAPTER XXIII
IT CAN BE DONE

We have examined in some detail the development of India's food and population problem; we have tried to analyse the causes and make a calculated guess at what can happen in the future. At the risk of some tedium I have tried to point out what needs to be done and how it can be done.

It is perhaps worth pointing out that the food crisis has at last evoked some constructive thought on the agricultural problem. Since I began to write this survey the Rs. 10,000 crore plan of economic development for India has been published over the signatures of eight prominent industrialists and economists. It is intended to take effect in 15 years, as a series of three 5-year plans. The preliminary objects are to double the per capita income of the Indian people to enable them to achieve minimum standards of food, clothing, housing, health and education. To do this it will be necessary to increase national income from industry by 500 per cent and from agriculture by 130 per cent. The people are expected to spend Rs. 2,100 crores a year on food (reckoned at pre-war price

levels) and Rs. 255 crores a year on cotton clothing (also reckoned at pre-war price levels). These plans mean doubling the output of cotton cloth and a "considerable increase in food production" Facilities for agriculture such as roads, railways, irrigation, electric power, implements and fertilisers are all taken care of in the scheme.

The 15-year plan has been criticised on the ground that it is a "big business" scheme to boost industry and that agriculture has been relatively neglected. The planners, however, agree that their proposals will not change "the essentially agricultural character of our economy"; though they claim that "as the demand for food crops which form the bulk of our agricultural products is comparatively inelastic, even after taking into account the probable increase in the population and the higher level of income which the plan will bring about and the larger demand for industrial raw materials, it is not likely that more than a 130 per cent increase will be absorbed within the country."

Considering the demands for both cotton and food which the plan envisages, 130 per cent appears to be an under-estimate. Moreover, the planners, in spite of their basic idea of doubling the per capita income, do not appear to have investigated very carefully how this is going to be achieved without radically altering agricultural incomes. The contention that once a minimum standard has been reached the demand for food is comparatively inelastic, whatever the consumer's income, is of course correct.

For agriculture the planners pin their faith to cooperative farming and to increasing the yield per acre. They believe that some measure of compulsion may be necessary to start co-operative farming which enables the size of the holding to be increased for cultivation purposes without depriving the owners of their rights.

This idea of abandoning the laissez-faire policy towards the actual conduct of farming is interesting

because pressure of the wartime food crisis is forcing present administirations in the same direction.

Bombay, which pioneered rationing in 1943, began 1944 with two more pioneer schemes: food procurement by making a graded levy on the surpluses of the more substantial cultivators in the province, and plans to prescribe where necessary which crops should be grown. Both ideas are revolutionary in India and are intended to make Bombay, which is a deficit area, as self-supporting as possible. In the case of compulsion for crops, the intention is to make certain districts, which normally concentrate on cotton, grow a proportion of their own food and to ensure that those districts which are already carrying out their obligations do not backslide. On the whole, the "Grow More Food" campaign was most successful in the province, but it did not succeed in weaning away certain areas from that bugbear of Indian agriculture and industry, short staple cotton. During 1943-44 it is reckoned that the Indian cotton crop contained a million bales of unwanted low grade cotton. The land, labour, money and transport needed to produce that cotton should have been devoted to food. If the Bombay scheme succeeds it will open the way to much more rapid crop changes than were possible when the cultivator was allowed to do as he liked.

The graded levy of produce assumes that a certain proportion of all sown land has been devoted to food crops. No levy is made on a grower who has not raised more than 27½ maunds of food grains, but above that minimum the demand is so calculated that an increasing proportion of the grower's (and landlord's) surplus is bought by Government. No private trading outside each village is allowed. The grain is stored at convenient centres and redistributed to the landless rural population and cultivators who do not grow sufficient for themselves, at rates not more than five per cent above the price paid to the grower. Wherever possible co-operative societies are being used as the official agents.

Such methods raise several interesting points. The first is the stimulus given to the co-operative movement, especially in its sale and purchase aspects which are those most needed to secure for the farmer a better share in the value of his crop. The second is the removal of the middleman, thus giving both grower and consumer the squarest possible deal. It should be noted in this connection that except in districts which have large surpluses, the authorities expect their purchases to be redistributed in the same area. The idea is to prevent the grain disappearing into the black market, thus necessitating the transport of unnecessarily large amounts from outside. It is not intended to strip the districts for the sake of feeding the towns, most of which can be fed at least as conveniently on food imported from outside the province.

The third point is the financing of the grower in the period between crops. Normally this is done by the village shopkeeper, who thus has a lien on the harvest. This system breaks down when the cultivator has to sell to Government. Here undoubtedly the co-operative societies can help.

The fourth point is that very accurate crop data now becomes necessary for the calculation of the levy, the results of which should, however, provide a useful check.

I am not going to pretend that even the most sweeping of the practical schemes now being worked out will produce a Utopia. They will not. But if certain definite goals are achieved we may look forward to a sturdy and prosperous peasantry and an adequate food supply for everyone. The first thing obviously is the vigorous promotion of intensive farming; the second, the raising of the cultivator's living standard by breaking not only the money-lender's but the middleman's clutch, and the third, the economic use of the land by controlling where necessary the variety and quality of crop to be grown—the Bombay system may yet have to become general.

At the moment Indian farming is just recovering from the lowest ebb which any system of farming ever reached and still remained farming. Exploitation and neglect have been the reigning evils. The disasters of 1943 were a drastic warning of the future if action is not taken in time. Our course is clear, though it will be unpleasant for a number of people who have no legitimate place in either agriculture or the distribution of its products. In 1943 they made fortunes which would have financed agricultural improvements for decades to come.

Never again must there be such decay in India's prime means of livelihood as enabled Sir Ziauddin Ahmed to state openly in the Central Assembly that in one area alone, food traders paid Rs. 6 crores in bribes. I need not write more.

Easter Sunday, 1944.